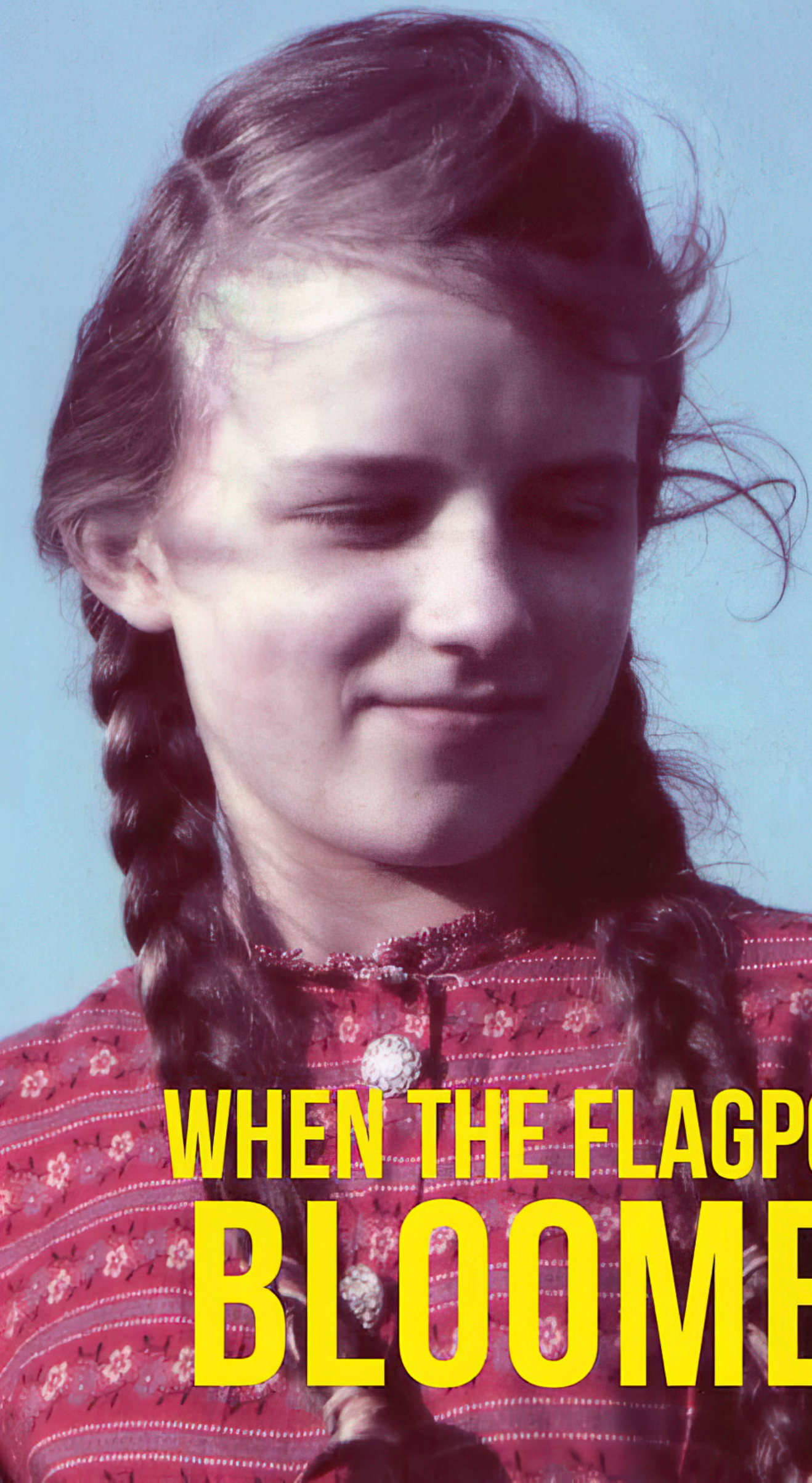
Vera Oredsson



WHEN THE FLAGPOLES BLOOMED

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BY

VERA OREDSSON

TRANSLATED BY LISA HELLMAN

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With this book, I would like to rebuke all the terrible revelling in lies that were aimed at Germany's most honourable time in history. This compilation of stories is for the most part things that I myself have experienced, but also includes what others have told me about that period of a few years that was filled with devotion, work, struggle, and ideological upbringing.

In the abundance of flourishing horror stories, defamation and sob-story propaganda whose main objective is to extort money in the form of repayment allowances from the defeated German people, I would like to light candles of truth in hope that they will radiate greater clarity and constrict the dark atmosphere of persecution and hate that is built up from these infernal lies.

The Author

The Translator's Foreword

You are now holding a very important historical document in your hands. This book contains the unique story of an extraordinary woman who lived at the time of the Third Reich and could see how it worked with her own eyes. Vera Oredsson tells us what it was like for her to grow up in National Socialist Germany. She was five years old when the National Socialists came to power and thus experienced the great changes that took place at that time. Her story will keep you captivated from start to finish. It will make you laugh. It will make you cry. It will make you wonder why you never heard about such things when you studied World War II in school. It will, in other words, open your eyes to the other side of the story, a side that is severely denied and suppressed.

We have learned many things in school about the World Wars. We are always told to remember what happened then so that it will never happen again. At the same time, we are taught that we should listen to both sides of a story before passing judgement in a dispute. But when it comes to the Third Reich and the events of World War II, we have only been fed one side of the story, the victors' side. German survivors of the war are few in number and soon they will be gone. It is of great importance that their voices be heard so that the mistakes of the past will not be repeated.

We are in a day and age when there are a number of genocidal wars going on. History, in other words, is repeating itself right before our very eyes. Thanks to Internet, we are much more able to hear both sides of a story. If we only rely on mainstream media for our information, we are at risk of only hearing one side. If we want to hear the other side of the story, we need to go beyond massmedia and Wikipedia and seek other sources, even if those sources are not always seen as politically correct. In doing so, we risk being classed as horrible people who want to exterminate other people simply because they belong to a certain religion or ethnic group. This is one of the greatest crimes of our time. One clear example of this insanity is the case of Monika Schaefer, the brave woman who proofread this book and who was to write this foreword. Unfortunately she was arrested on January 3, 2018 for apologizing to her deceased mother because she reproached her for not doing anything to stop all the horrible things that the Germans are said to have done during the war. She is now sitting in a high security prison for having the wrong

views of historical events. She is sitting in prison, together with murderers and rapists, for using her intellect and coming to her own conclusions, rather than blindly following the indoctrination that we have all been subjected to. We often boast about how free our Western countries are, how we are able to criticize our leaders and their ideas. But as in the case of Monika and others like her, we are obviously no longer free to question what our rulers want us to believe. No matter where you stand on this issue, the very fact that our rights and freedoms are quickly disappearing should be a wake-up call that something is terribly wrong here.

We are at a crossroad now. We are living in a time when many sovereign nations are being destroyed and millions of people are suffering because of it. It is up to each and every one of us to decide if we want to allow this to continue or if we want to fight for our right to exist in our sovereign nation states. Some of you might feel a chill running up your spines because all the information you have been fed brings up horrible pictures from the war. But please, before you fall victim to that, calm your nerves, clear your mind, and read Oredsson's book with an open mind. She shares with us her experiences of growing up during the war, and thus gives us a very different picture of the Third Reich and its leaders than what we have been taught in school.

Remember what we in the West have always been taught about our justice system: One is innocent until proven guilty. Proper evidence must be submitted to the court. If a person is to be found guilty, he or she must be guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt. If there is a shadow of doubt, the person is to be freed. Is that really how our justice system works today? Sylvia Stolz, a German lawyer, was arrested and put on trial because she defended her client, Ernst Zündel. Her crime? To ask the prosecutor to present evidence that the Holocaust had in fact happened (asking the prosecutor to present evidence that proves the guilt of the accused is standard practice for a defence lawyer). Instead of presenting the evidence that Stolz asked for, and which was necessary to either free or convict her client, she got arrested. Her client was later convicted, even though no evidence was produced that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was wrong. Regardless of what you believe about the Holocaust, this is not the way that the justice system is supposed to work!

For those of you who already hold strong beliefs about the true

nature of National Socialism, enjoy the ride! For those of you who are new to the subject, let Oredsson's story open up a new world for you where you dare to ask important questions about historical events. Let her book inspire you to seek more information about what really happened in Germany during the wars and what the wars were really about. Do not be afraid if the information comes from non-politically-correct sources. Remember, both sides need to be heard. Now is the time for that to happen.

Lisa Hellman
February 22, 2018

Foreword

During my many years as contributor to both the Nordic Nationalist Party's magazine and the Norwegian newspaper F*olk og land* I have occasionally written about my childhood days in National Socialist Germany from 1933 to 1945 in order to repudiate defaming and irresponsible articles in the mass media about that country. My articles have also refuted the Zionist-owned publishing companies, as well as movies, radio, and television programs. My reaction to such an overwhelming superior force has often resulted in letters from my readers telling me that I "must" write a book about my experiences. Others have also quietly wondered if I could have experienced so much. I have really had to be pressed to take on this project of writing a book, given that I am aware of what people expect from the task, but once I was finally persuaded to do it, I took up my pen.

* * * *

I was born on February 21, 1928. I was thus 5 years old in 1933 when Germany said its final farewell to the past and a new National Socialist society took shape. I had the privilege of living quite literally right in the middle of this society's starting point, namely Berlin. I remember the long deployment along Unter den Linden as if it were yesterday. Torches burned and songs spread joyfully along the parade route. For a 5-year-old girl among all the spectators along the parade route it was an eternally overwhelming rapture. In the time that would later come, I was literally drawn into the center of activities, particularly the political ones.

One of the main reasons was that I did not find my childhood home particularly happy and harmonious. The reader should not believe that there was alcoholism or other loathsome habits in my home. No, far from it. Many of today's children from our society would surely be quite happy about the living conditions I had at home. The fact that I did not feel at home there could be because of my own personality.

The parental love that there was in a strict so-called middle-class home, especially a German one, was for me simply preposterous to accept and live up to. Perhaps my Swedish blood from my mother's side unconsciously rebelled against the German side. Parental love, if I choose to call it that, was intensely focused on one thing: school! School meant everything. This fixation on school resulted in my

father using forcible means against me and my mother being passive. On top of that there were the complaints from my relatives over "the uneducated kid", which resulted in my hating school with a passion. "Parental love" really made my school years a complete living hell.

On my way home from school I childishly counted on a hope that I could count to a certain number of men wearing glasses before I got home so I did not get punished for that bloody homework assignment. Another time I could in the same way count "schimmel", horses that pulled the beer wagons down the streets of Berlin.

The Hitler youth was so freeing! We were called to singing classes, sports, and games two evenings a week, as well as to political educational classes, parties, and positive tasks with a clear National Socialist form.

* * * *

Furthermore, there were differences in character between my parents. Father was a typical methodical person who was raised in an officer's family in a strict Prussian spirit. Mother was mild, spontaneous, and spasmodic when it came to her household duties, which gave rise to chaos when we needed clean clothes, whole socks, or punctual meals. How these two people could join their fates from 1927 to 1945, when their unavoidable divorce drew near and happened in 1950, is still a mystery to me. Mother was a tall and stately brunette with big, clear, blue eyes, while my father was small, stocky, and bald. Both were intelligent and learned, but when it came to their temperaments, they were totally incompatible. Father had satirical humour, while Mother was melancholy, tearful, and after the birth of my brother in 1936, completely son-fixated. Since then I hardly had a place in her thoughts.

As for me, I was not like a typical child, affectionate and wanting to be hugged. I appreciated more order and cleanliness as proof of one's love for me, which is something I missed in my home. Those times I sympathized with Father were the ones in which he was upset by and argued with Mother over the lack of order in the home.

But no matter how angry Father was, he never lifted a hand to Mother. I have never witnessed any wife-beating, neither at home nor in any home of my own. And now I must emphasize and to be fair point out that the disorder in our home was never constant. When Mother put her mind to it and got going, she could turn the whole house upside down: paint, wallpaper, and clean. But the continual upkeep, which perhaps is the foundation of harmony, was

missing.

* * * *

My maternal grandparents lived next door to my paternal grandparents in an apartment in *Gosslerstrasse Friedenau*, but they never associated with one another. This too was because they were opposites when it came to personalities and interests. My Swedish maternal grandparents were open people, good-humoured and well-liked. Grandfather—a Swedish architect—had left Sweden with his beautiful bride because of the tough competition in his field and settled down in Berlin at the turn of the century. At the beginning of the 1930s he got a job with the German historical museums and was given the task of travelling around Europe in order to study and sketch historical buildings for further revisions in Berlin. Later, when worry began to spread over Germany and the war came, he drew bomb shelters and was authorized to inspect the durability of existing bomb shelters for the civilian population and for industries.

Grandmother was somewhat of a copy of my mother, but contrary to the ideal of the typical German man at the time, Grandfather loved to help out in the home. He gladly cleaned the house and showed his interest in the household chores by doing them. He happily cooked the meals from his own ideas and skills.

When I visited my maternal grandparents, Grandfather knew that I enjoyed his sandwiches cut into small squares with different toppings. My grandparents never quarreled, at least not in my presence. Their four-room apartment, like my paternal grandparents', was located across from a lyceum (a girls' secondary grammar school) and its school yard. The area of Friedenau was adjacent to Steglitz, where we lived.

I liked my maternal grandparents' home, their Swedish interior decorating taste, and Grandfather's oak furniture that he designed and drew with his own hands (and is now, after a few detours, in our son's home in *Östergötland* in a fitting country setting), gave then, as now, a feeling of joy.

My paternal grandfather had a totally different character: stern, unavailable, and reserved. He hardly ever set foot in the kitchen. My paternal grandmother was a pretty girl from East Prussia, but cataracts shortened her youth considerably. Despite knowledge of the girl's fate, Grandfather married that sweet farm girl and was faithful to her his whole life. They both worshiped each other in their humdrum existence, where the stroke of the clock decided set times

for walks, meals, and rest, etc. One could only visit them between 16:00 and 17:30. While I talked to Grandmother, Grandfather played Solitaire.

My maternal grandparents liked beautiful clothes, whereas my paternal grandparents did not care a bit about them. If I saw that my paternal grandparents were out for a walk, I hid myself. Their clothes embarrassed me. They were worn-out, shabby, and ugly, despite the fact that they could afford to dress differently. Their household consisted of Grandfather's mild sister Hedvig, who was an incredible cook, clean, and orderly. My aunt Grete rented a room from her parents, but we only met for short periods. She worked for the Ministry of Propaganda and was, like my father, a party member. She died soon after the war because of the after-effects from her time in American concentration camps. My maternal grandfather was loyal, but never politically active.

My paternal grandfather remained faithful to Bismarck. After World War I he was banished from West Prussia, which was later called the Polish Corridor. One could never decipher his political stance. His unavailability prevented such confidential conversations.

* * * *

I hope this introduction has sufficiently presented my family's background and I hope it gives a bit of guidance in my coming stories. I would like to add a bit more data to my introduction:

Vera Martha Birgitta Schimanski

Born in Berlin-Schöneberg in 1928

Early childhood years: Berlin-Steglitz

Street addresses: Opitzstraße, and after 1934 Markelstraße

Through the Swedish Church, the so-called *Viktoriaförsamlingen* in Berlin: summer vacations each year in Sweden. My last summer vacation in Ljusdal, Sweden was in 1939, just before the outbreak of the war.

In 1940, after the liberation of West Prussia, I travelled to my father's birthplace, Bromberg, for the first time.

Because of the danger of bombings, the children from the larger cities were moved to the southern part of Germany. They were grouped according to their school classes.

KLV (*Kinder Land Verschickung*, (Child Land Dispatch, translator's note) was founded by Dr. Goebbels. It was perfectly organized and safe.

In the fall of 1940 I was moved to a mountainous area in Schlesien,

where I stayed until the spring of 1941. I was later moved to Steinau, a lowlands area by the river Oder. What these cities and towns, as Polish stolen goods, are called, is not of interest to me. In 1945 Lauban became an enormous battlefield.

In February, 1942 I had to leave my safe life in KLV because I was then of age for vocational training. I returned to a freezing Berlin with night bombing raids and the cursed School of Commerce with its accompanying tests on our homework and corporal punishment in the evenings, which were a dark contrast to life in the KLV.

In the fall of 1943 my whole family was evacuated and we were scattered again. I went to East Prussia and then to West Prussia until January, 1945.

1943: my maternal grandparents, Ragnhild and Wilhelm Svensson, moved home to Sweden, a move that my grandfather regretted deeply for the rest of his days. He went from being a highly appreciated and idolized person, popular with his relatives, who often visited him in Berlin, to being frozen out. The rich relatives in the circle of the owners of the conservative newspaper *Karlshamns Allehanda* knew their place... Penniless and bitter, he died in 1953 surrounded by all his blueprints where he dreamed about the rebuilding of Berlin. He died in a hotel in Karlshamn. Grandmother lived for two more years, very broken down because of her rheumatism. They were both buried in the family grave in Karlshamn's cemetery.

After the liberation of West Prussia, my paternal grandparents moved back to Gnesen, where my grandmother died in 1944. Grandfather lived through yet another escape and deportation, and died in Berlin in 1949. Grandmother and Grandfather did not get to share a grave.

My father's workplace moved to Schwarzbach, a town close to Dresden.

My education was somewhat chaotic. I felt quite comfortable in elementary school, with its National Socialist direction, but my time in junior secondary school, with the pressure from my parents, was a disaster. I did not feel comfortable during this period of three terms, with both my teachers and classmates. My homeroom teacher looked like the British Prime Minister Chamberlain and the female teachers, with their snobby pointy noses, drove me to skip class a good number of times, which ended in expulsion. My relatives were

appalled, and my parents' dissociation became more obvious.

After elementary school and the School of Commerce with private lectures in Swedish in the Viktoria parish, I tried a short time in a government-run agricultural school, but on the advice of the SS (Protection Squadron, translator's note) I transferred over to the brown National Socialist school in Thorn, which was a part of the social society activity NSV, *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt*, meaning "National Socialist People's Welfare". I had finally been able to choose my own vocation, free of the meddling from my parents and relatives, and this was thanks to a government that today is so intensely lied about! I obtained the schooling I felt comfortable with. The yoke of feeling stupid, hopeless, and uneducable was lifted from my shoulders there. The teachers brought out my self-confidence and the principal was completely satisfied with how I took in their teachings, without having to feel fear or anxiety over the evening questionings about my homework. I had reached my goal and the path that in the end led me straight to being a National Socialist.

October 1993

Vera Oredsson

Vera's paternal grandfather Wilhelm Schimanski as a young officer in the service of the Emperor.

The Flagpoles are Blooming

For the Thanksgiving celebration, Berlin put on its finest apparel to receive farmers, dressed in national attire, with decorated horse-drawn wagons in long caravans. While the drivers held the reins, women threw flowers to the spectators. There were shouts of joy and belief in the future. Gorgeous weather and flowers, flowers... flags, flags...

Behind me I could hear a child's voice from out of the crowd: "Look Father! The flagpoles are blooming!" I turned around and saw a small, enthusiastic chap on his father's shoulders, pointing at the tall flagpoles around the square. They were decorated with wound, verdant garlands and their tops were crowned with colourful flower bouquets, while the flags hung like standards of proud messages of joy. The father's gaze followed the boy's pointer finger and he answered, "Yes, the flagpoles are blooming, my boy." Indeed, never have the flagpoles been decorated with so many flowers and golden ribbons as during the time of the Third Reich... anywhere, ever.

A young and tired Vera lying and resting.

Shimanskis on their wedding day.

Daily Life

I always feel an indulgent smile in me when the rural folk talk about how they view city dwellers. They like to describe city dwellers as lost, bored, disharmonious, and rootless, but yet with an air of being superior to rural people. This is not how it really is.

City folk, generally speaking, love their city, their street, and their neighbourhood just as much as the farmer or anyone else who lives in a rural area loves his farm, his house, his property, and his home turf. This naïve attitude can even be disastrous when eager architects who have grown up in the country or in small towns come to the big city. They are convinced that they can just tear down houses and whole blocks and put up ugly sky-scrapers, office and bank buildings or other showpieces, or just level the ground for parking lots. These architects and building contractors or influential politicians have no idea that the city folk would feel sadness, longing, or grief over being forced to move to another neighbourhood or suburb.

* * * *

Berlin is an enormous metropolis with millions of inhabitants. The inner city has the world-famous shopping street called Kurfürstendamm, with rows of stores on the ground floor and up. It has department stores and restaurants, cafés with indoor and outdoor service, and of course apartment buildings. Along the sides and centers of the streets there are beautiful plantations. On top of all this there is the traffic, private cars, buses, and subway stations.

And then there is the most fashionable street in town, Unter den Linden, with Brandenburger Tor. The outlying areas are less-known to visitors and tourists, as well as to TV-viewers. I grew up southeast of city center in a district called Steglitz. Before the war and terror bombings, this area consisted mainly of ornamented buildings from the turn of the century. The streets were wide and there were huge trees along the sidewalks on both sides of the streets. In front of the houses there were small yards fenced in with imaginative iron constructions. These fences were melted down for the war industry once the war was upon us.

The streets were named after the trees that lined them. Having trees that lined the streets was something peculiar to Berlin. *Unter den Linden* (Under the lime trees) is of course known to all, but there was also *Unter den Eichen* (Under the Oaks, translator's note), Ahornstraße (Maple Street, translator's note), *Ebereschenallee*

(Mountain Ash Avenue, translator's note), and *Kastanienallee* (Chestnut Avenue, translator's note). These names clarified what kinds of trees grew there. These planted trees gave a wonderful accord with the seasons. The blooming chestnuts with their red and white "Christmas tree lights", lavished their display of colours over the sidewalks and roadways. A little lane was built by hawthorn bushes that with their small red bunches of roses shone so beautifully. Nevertheless, we called the street Kesselring Avenue because the famous general lived there. The trees also instilled a feeling of freshness and air, especially when the rain showers came after a heat wave. That is when one could witness how the windows were opened wide and the people inside inhaled the delightful fresh air and the wonderful smell of fresh leaves. At times like this, the people perked up and those living on the lower floors put pillows on the window sills so they could talk to one another or with neighbours who were passing by.

* * * *

Steglitz is adjacent to Friedenau, Wilmersdorf and Dahlem. Dahlem was seen as a "ritzy" area with grand houses. When class-consciousness was rubbed out by National Socialism, the area was called "where the rich people live" with the intention that one could hopefully be "rich" without belonging to a certain "class".

Amongst the many exaggerated lies about the Third Reich, it is very seldom that day-to-day life during the time of that government is talked about. Life was not much different from the daily life in other countries, at least when it comes to what we recognize from other European countries. It was presumably safer, though. In German fashion it was more uniformed, disciplined, and had the decisive ideology of solidarity of the people as its foundation. When the war came upon us this vision was never fully completed. It is an ideological goal that takes generations to completely permeate the collective soul of the people.

We Berliners, just like other Germans, did not go around fearing for our lives nor were we suppressed or afraid that an unguarded word would be overheard and interpreted as criticism against the government, which is how daily life was in communist dictatorships. Oh, no, no one, not even Adolf Hitler, could put gags on Germans in general or Berliners in particular. People spoke openly and freely about whatever they had on their minds or on the tips of their tongues. During the war it may have been the case that people

needed to be more careful and "watch their tongues", but was it not the same way in Sweden at that time? "*EN SVENSK TIGER*" (a Swede keeps his mouth shut) became an accepted slogan. On the other hand, it must be remembered that in today's Germany, Germans are not allowed to say either "Heil Hitler" or sing certain songs, and right now (June, 1994) a law is being passed that can give up to 3 years in prison for denying the Holocaust.

Germans during the Hitler era were allowed to travel freely, both domestically and internationally. Smaller grants were even given to those who were not so well-off for such trips. The social welfare system was built up and it became a model for other countries, not to mention for our Swedish Social Democratic welfare state. The words "National" and "Socialism" were not empty words; they were the very real foundation of the country called the Third Reich.

* * * *

Family life was free from government influence. Each family solved its own problems and lived according to its own rhythm. People worked, entertained themselves, shopped, and went in for different leisure activities according to their own desires and interests. It was only those who were politically active and more interested in the development of society whose daily lives could be affected.

During the day it was rare one would see uniformed men on the streets of Berlin. One saw mothers out shopping. Tradespeople hurried home to their families after work. Children were seen on their way to or from school. Friends were seen talking or out strolling. On Sundays families were seen out for walks in the areas' beautiful parks, something there were many of in Berlin, some bigger than others. Father and I, later my brother and I, or our whole family, often went for walks along a wide avenue from Breitenbach to Dahlem. The avenue consisted of a wide garden that divided the roadway and was lined with, in my opinion, ugly 1920s functional houses in thin rows.

One thing that always put me in a solemn mood was the mighty ringing of the church bells that echoed out from all the churches in Berlin. These dark, wonderful, heavy strokes summoned Protestants and Catholics to church.

We often went to the Botanical Garden, where well cared-for gardens covering a great area gave a tender display of rich colours in the spring and with magnolia trees that looked like some rogue had put water lilies on their cold branches. The way home went through

small allotment-garden areas where Berliners with their cultivations wanted to outdo each other with their delightful flowers. This kind of city dweller's leisure activity was personally encouraged by Adolf Hitler in order to direct the simple citizen's leisure interests towards something more than meeting up in the beer parlors.

If it rained or if the weather was not inviting enough for walks, we went to museums and castles in city center, or to the beautiful Potsdam with its historical atmosphere. Or one stayed at home and worked on one's interests and hobbies at home.

* * * *

There were no problems with either food or housing. Housing and food were considered to be the most important rights of the citizens, according to the National Socialist state. On top of that, the standard of living was raised every year that the National Socialists were in power. Hermann Göring, as Home Secretary, put through lowering of rents for all older living areas and recommended right of possession after a certain number of years for conscientious tenants.

School remained politically uninfluenced, generally speaking. On the other hand, segregation between Protestants and Catholics was abolished. The only thing that was kept separate was religious instruction.

The school I went to was just a block away from home. It was a yellow brick building with verdant trees that grew on the big school yard, which my school shared with an adjacent one. These trees marked the border between our school yards.

I was lucky to attend a school where principal Kollander was a devoted National Socialist. He was murdered by the Communists in 1945. (He had a quote from Dr. Goebbels on his door: "Praised be everything that rendered me harder". The same quote is the source of inspiration to both of G. A. Oredsson's memoirs.)

* * * *

Every Monday morning the school week started with a call and oath of allegiance to National Socialism. The principal often invited our parents to meetings and arranged school parties and field trips.

Classes were flexible, that is to say they were often governed by the weather, which the school children in Germany were very grateful for because they had such a short summer holiday. Just six weeks in July and August. When the weather was nice and sunny, the principal quickly and easily arranged field trips, like boat trips down the Spree Channel to the islands. *Pfaueninsel* (Peacock Island) was a

favourite spot to visit, for there one could find the beautiful birds freely making spectacles of themselves with their brilliantly coloured feathers, even if their songs were not all that melodious. Visits to castles and other inspiring buildings that gave us a feeling of connectedness were often incorporated into history classes.

The Olympic Stadium treated us to refreshing swims in its large pools. The school's own school yard was located near an allotment garden area, where we learned about gardening and composting, and where we gained insights into the effect of the seasons on plant life. We learned general skills in how to dig, chop, thin out, and cultivate plants.

After such wonderful days of such classes we naturally had to catch up on the more theoretical knowledge with extra lecture hours, but our school days were never as long as they were in Sweden. Our classes ended at 2:00 pm at the latest on the long days.

The last year of school was comprised of several hours of education in child care and home economics. When it came to the classes in child care, the girls had to find large dolls to be used as instruction material. We brought in our dearest ones and with laughs and "words of abuse" we compared our dolls before the more serious instruction took over with diaper changing, feeding, etc.

* * * *

Our school on *Lepiusstraße* was exhibited as a model National Socialist school. The radio station often came for a visit and broadcasted our appeals and lectures to its listeners.

Life felt safe and secure.

Health care under the National Socialist government became available to everyone. The well-organized health insurance was income-regulated, but with the same consultations for everyone. Dental and eye care were also included. Preventative health care was recommended and increased consumption of vegetables, exercise, sports, and outdoor activities were encouraged. Not to mention the importance of personal hygiene.

Regulations for light-filled and airy homes and child-friendly environments were put in place. One thing I found to be a terrible backwardness was the stinky garbage wagons that were seen on the streets of Stockholm in the 1940s and -50s. In my early childhood, Berlin had already covered and closed garbage trucks that crushed the garbage when it was loaded. It is true that these made quite a

racket, but they were certainly more hygienic than the stinky and fly-filled wagons in Stockholm.

* * * *

People ordered fresh bread to have with their morning coffee. It was hung on the door handle together with the milk bottles. With my childish feeling of justice and fervour for the less fortunate, I handed out the white cloth bags and their contents to those I thought needed them most on my way to school in the morning. A venture that elicited both admiration and uproar in my staircase.

What about the Jews? I know that some of my readers are going to ask about them. Yes, we children irritated them with different practical jokes like drawing the Star of David on their doors with chalk, but we never went as far as serious violence. And it must be said that during the war when the gold star was proclaimed to be worn by the Jews, we felt somehow embarrassed and our pranks ceased. The gold star that was worn by the Jews was an invention of Wilhelm Canaris, the head of German intelligence, who towards the end of the war was revealed as a double agent in English service. On the initiative of the English, he was given the task of pushing through this decision, which gave the desired result: Germans quietly did not accept that the Jews should bear the gold star and mostly felt sorry for them when they saw them with flowers in their arms to conceal the star.

Swedes and many others with them will never be able to understand the problem with the Jews as it really was in the 1920s and -30s. The mass media, the legal system, businesses, movies, theatre, all higher posts called intellectual professions, the banks, the stock exchange... were owned, controlled, and influenced by the Jews.

Is this because they were especially gifted and talented? NO. It is not that simple. It is their uniting strength that makes the difference. Something we National Socialists, especially after 1945, totally miss: support one another, help each other when it comes to employment and livelihood, etc. A Jew within established and leading institutions, state-owned or private, makes sure that there will be even more Jews, in other words more kin, in the place in question. They come first in line and slowly whole companies, banks, mass media, film, theatre, the whole state, are controlled by Jews. This is what National Socialism wanted to break down.

* * * *

Enough about that. That direction was certainly not the central one for the every-day life of a National Socialist. The government hardly had the ambition to want to force its way into people's private integrity. The outbreak of the war forced demands on solidarity so as to fight, as painlessly as possible, for its own people against both the outside as well as the inside enemy.

Any visible under-the-table stock sales or trading in a crisis, as there were in other countries that were affected by the war, did not exist. If even the slightest incident like that were discovered and revealed, it was heavily penalized. That is why the German food industry, though scanty towards the end of the war, functioned without starvation until the final day of independence.

The pictures on TV, in movies, and in books, most often distorted and falsified, that show thin inmates in camps upon "liberation" are the result of "the liberator's" own war conduct. During the last weeks of the war they carpet-bombed industries, factories, and farms, anything that had anything to do with food production and transport. A person, prisoner in a camp or free, does not need many weeks without food to be turned into a skeleton and die of starvation. And those who died in this way can thank their "liberators" and their terrorist war conduct for their fate.

Easter of 1945 I remember that we got our egg ration increased despite the fact that large parts of the country lay in ruins. To this very day I think that was fantastic, when one sees these profiteering and food-producing extortionists in war-waging countries of the day, where the affected citizen does not have a chance to buy even the most essential goods. This problem never arose for the German people in Germany under the Third Reich. They deserve great praise for this, without reservation.

Class photo from Grade 1, Vera is sitting down, first from the right in the first row.

Vera and her class in Berlin.

Gosslerstrasse 18, Berlin. The Shimanski family lived on the fourth floor.

Vera with her mother Greta.

The Swastika

You walk into one of our Christian churches. An atmosphere of peace and serenity overpowers your body and soul. The knowledge of all the people before you who have sat in the pews, who have given their hard-earned money and often their own labour services, and with laborious day's work built these churches with paintings, richly ornamented woodwork and heavy doors. Then one sees Jesus hanging nailed to a cross with bloody hands and feet. It is such a grim and dominant sight that the peace and energizing that one had just experienced gets transformed into disgust and a longing to get out of the building. Nevertheless, the representatives of Christianity have succeeded at converting this symbol, with all its cruelty and humiliation, to some sort of symbol for love and peace. This just proves how people's thoughts and intelligence can be manipulated. Home-made biblical and sermon texts with connotations and assertions are pounded into the heads of generations of church-goers and get them to see such a sadistic and cruel symbol of Jesus on the cross as a symbol of love.

With the swastika the opposite has been done. With incessant lies and hateful rhetoric, they have managed to make the symbol of the sun and life into a loathsome symbol. The symbol of torture about the crucifixion of Jesus has been manipulated to be the message of Love, while humanity has been manipulated to view the sun symbol for all life on Earth as the sign of hate. How easily do the masses allow themselves to be deceived?!

I only remember fragments of my childhood before 1933, for natural reasons. But the suffering, tears, and scarcity that I witnessed around me in the struggle for existence can hardly be erased.

My family lived in a relatively new apartment building on Opitzstraße. It consisted of two rooms and a kitchen. One room was rented out to give our meager economy a boost. I had my bed in the kitchen. My father's bad mood, which was caused by his being unemployed and poor, was a constant source for quarrels and tiffs. Mother worked as a cleaning lady for a few diplomats and their families for a few small coins, and it was probably not easy to accept that roll, given that she was a former home-loving girl from a middle-class home. But it was certainly a good experience about the value of work in all contexts.

Father and I walked out to Grunewald, a near-by forest, and collected ant eggs, which we sold to bird salesmen. I still remember the creeping and biting ants on my arms and legs, when they bravely defended their hills. To this day a chill still comes over me when I see these creepy-crawlies doing their industrious work. One time I tripped and fell with the basket full of glass jars with eggs and badly cut the underside of one of my arms on the splinters.

I remember my parents strictly warning me never to follow a stranger, not even to play on the street. They worried as soon as I was out of their sight. The boogiemen and beggars made life unsafe for the Berlin kids (and other kids in bigger German cities) before 1933.

If I were ever left at home alone, I was given strict orders never to open the door or answer through the mail slot if someone knocked on the door. People begging for bread were not always what they seemed to be. One such "beggar" man looked through our mail slot and, seeing my terror-stricken being, showed me his penis through it. I hid in the clothes closet, where my parents found me in tears. That is the way it was during the "wonderful democratic days of the Weimar republic", an inferno with all sorts of scum who permeated the capital of the country.

* * * *

One strike changed everything!

When the National Socialists gained power, they made May 1 a national holiday. I quote Dr. Goebbels on May 1, 1933: "Parents and children, workers and citizens, entrepreneurs and employees, high or low, the divisions of the classes are wiped out. We are one people! The sun shines once again over Germany".

In the summer of 1933 Mother and I travelled to Sweden with other children and mothers with the help of the Swedish congregation. Mother and some of the other women worked in the orphanage in central Sweden and we had a pleasant summer. The residents in the community looked on us with curiosity and wondered about our way of playing. The different environments that we had grown up in, compared to the Swedish children, made us inventive. We made "cars" with seats, hoods, and instrument panels out of dirt. Wheels from baby carriages were turned into steering wheels, etc. "You Germans can sure be creative and cooperative!" said our Swedish friends, a little jealously.

* * * *

Upon our arrival to *Berlin Stettiner Bahnhof* we were met by a happily smiling SA (Storm Troopers, translator's note) man with a swastika armband in the familiar colours of red, white, and black around his arm and surprisingly I discovered that it was my father in that uniform! He was a completely different father than we had left about a month ago. It was a father who was straight-backed, happy, and proud who lifted me up and carried me on his arm.

But it was not only the person who had changed under the sign of the swastika. The times changed in 1933. Now I was allowed to play on the street where the big poplars framed the avenue. There was now a liberating atmosphere over the home's protection and the parents' mood. Gone were the quarrels, anxieties, and worries. A new time had come!

We moved to a three-room apartment on *Markelstraße*. Hermann Göring's rental regulations for older buildings had made it possible to rent larger apartments. I got my own room until my brother was born in 1936.

Unemployment disappeared and an era of hopefulness took over. Everything got better under the banner of the swastika! For me, the swastika can never be turned into a symbol of fear, nor can I be convinced that it is a sign of darkness. To me it will always be a sign of the sun and the light. It is a symbol of luck with the banners decorated with flowers and golden bands.

Along Gosslerstaße, where my maternal grandparents lived, the blue and yellow Swedish flag always shone in harmony with the black, red, and white swastika banners.

* * * *

During a trip to Helsingborg, Sweden in 1938, when we stayed with a well-off Swedish-Danish family with six children and a lot of servants, I, a Berlin child, experienced a wonderful, warm summer as a member of the family. I remember the summer cabin with the grass roof, and the sunny days that tanned my skin and bleached my hair as an unforgettable and wonderful time.

I often wore black running shoes, shorts, and a white tank top with the HJ (Hitler Youth, translator's note) symbol, where the swastika shone brightly. At that time the people around me did not react to that symbol.

One day when I was at the beach, I met a uniformed youngster in blue and yellow who asked me if I wanted to come to their near-by camp to tell them about Germany. I suppose that this was the first

time I had unknowingly come in contact with the Lindholm movement/Nordic Youth. Their camp was nestled in lush greenery by the edge of a forest and the youth asked many questions, eager to learn about Germany. I answered their questions and told them what I could. They were obviously satisfied with my answers, given that I was thanked with a big silver coin that I, like a child, could not resist the temptation to turn into candy, or in my case, coconut balls, which for me were a delicious and rare treat.

* * * *

The years passed by. The swastika became a symbol of security, the symbol of victory, and later, for the struggle and the will to resist, and finally the symbol of trust.

In March, 1945, when Mother, my brother Folke, and I went to Lübeck under Swedish protection, I for the first time experienced the winds of change: the hatred of the symbol. One of the men from the Red Cross with the so-called white buses screamed wildly about my brown HJ jacket with the HJ mark on the sleeve, the jacket I was so proud of. It was my possession, and totally taken by surprise by his hatred, I replied angrily that I will continue to wear it. But the pressure from our surroundings made my mother take it away from me at an "appropriate time" and replace it with a few eggs.

The poor swastika, I always think, when I see it doodled as a symbol of fear (often turned the wrong way, just like the clearly incorrect interpretation of the meaning of the symbol). But even the so-called sympathizers of National Socialism use our swastika/sun symbol so often in incorrect ways and for incorrect purposes. They want to "threaten" people with it by saying "Wait for the coming revenge", "curse or executioner". Think about how they play into the hands of our opponents. That is just how they want people to see our beautiful symbol. For us faithful National Socialists, the swastika will always be the symbol of joy and light, that in memories from special occasions is decorated with golden ribbons and flowers. It is the symbol of strength, beauty, morals, security, and progression in a healthy way.

Vera's father Hans, as an SA man in Berlin in 1933.

Hans at home in his study.

Inside the Gates of the Three Crowns

The Swedish Church in Berlin runs through my life in the country's capital like a blue-yellow ribbon, but the blue and yellow colours became more soiled with time, in time with the changes of the priests in the congregation.

At the beginning of the 1930s there was an understanding between the Germans and the Swedes that through Reverend Sebart something of an oasis was created for the Swedes in Germany. In the times of crisis and unemployment in Berlin, it was a deed in the true spirit of Christianity. The Swedish Church became a harmonious breathing hole in contrast to the immorality of the 1920s, Communism's anarchy, street fighting, murder, and misery.

* * * *

Reverend Sebart was generally well-liked. He too experienced the great shake-up and changes in society that occurred with the victory of the National Socialists in 1933. The calmness and security returned. The pimps and prostitutes disappeared from the streets. The dirty old men and other shadowy figures disappeared. The clubs and nests for gays, drugs, and the uncontrollable moral decline were stopped and its practitioners were gone. Berlin woke up from its humiliation and decline and became once again a city of sound initiative, eagerness to work, and belief in the future, as becomes a capital city of a European country.

With this experience of change, it was with true conviction when he, in his church services, prayed to God for the protection of the King of Sweden and the leader of Germany. Perhaps this behaviour irritated certain potentates and Sebart was replaced by Reverend Forell, a man who had neither witnessed Berlin's humiliation nor had a neutral stance when it came to National Socialism. His right-wing anti-National Socialism was no secret. Swedish-Germans found that they could no longer express their positive views of the regime and adapted their utterances accordingly because they still wanted to have contact with Sweden, speak Swedish, and practice Swedish traditions and customs. And as everyone should know, there is nothing more Swedish outside of Sweden than the Swedish Church. Every Swedish sailor can confirm that they visit the Swedish Church no matter where they are in the world, and it is not because they are particularly religious. It is a piece of Mother Earth one wants to feel, where Swedishness is experienced, the connection to the home

country is felt, through the participation in various activities. The library, newspapers, for example. We experienced our connection to Sweden in the Swedish Church through activities such as folk dances, real Swedish Midsummer celebrations, Christmas traditions, and the like.

Schooling in the church was a plus for me and I gladly participated in it. Holidays from the German school coincided often with the school times in the Swedish one, and I could be with the purely Swedish children. I can mention, for example, that amongst my temporary classmates were both of singer Zarah Leander's children, Göran and Bodel. On our breaks we played in a wonderful park by the church which was something quite different from the classic schoolyard.

* * * *

Through the agency of the Swedish Church, trips to Sweden were arranged every year, which contributed to my knowledge of this long country. I spent my summer holidays in areas that were so different from one another, such as Mörrum in Blekinge and Ljusdal in Hälsningland, where not just the climate, buildings, and scenery are different, but even the dialects.

My mother had a good laugh when I came home from Mörrum, Blekinge. With my bags full of new clothes from my relatives in Karlshamn, I met my mother at Stettiner Bahnhof and discovered surprisingly that my mother had a baby carriage with my few weeks old brother in it. I exclaimed in Blekinge dialect: "*OU! Han haur inget hauur!*" (Oh! He has no hair!).

In Ljusdal I was amazed at how light the nights were.

* * * *

In 1938, King Gustav the Fifth of Sweden visited Berlin. It was a very festive time, especially for the Swedish Church, but it left me very disappointed. We stood there as quiet fools I thought, in rows up the steps to the entrance, and waved idiotically with swishing Swedish paper flags. I was completely lacking in joy, merriness, and spontaneity. Everything was so forced and stilted. Then his majesty the king came, an old, sullen fart crouched down under an umbrella that was held up by the ambassador. Outside in the rain the always curious Berliners crowded around and loud comments were heard: "Was that a king?", "He's so old!" They were just as disappointed as I was, when the king, without a word or a smile, climbed the steps.

* * * *

The teacher in the Swedish Church was a strawberry blonde Valkyrie named Miss Höök. A congregation sister who looked like Herman Göring's late first wife Karin, I perceived her as an accommodating and friendly person. The sister visited us from time to time in our home on *Markelstraße*. We were all surprised by her choice of husbands: a small, spindly musician, who we parishioners saw as an odd little fellow. I do not know what his profession was, but he always played the fiddle, dressed in folk costume for Midsummer and Christmas celebrations.

* * * *

Upon my return from KLV in 1942, everything had changed. The Swedish-Germans who had National Socialist ties felt an uncomfortable freezing out by the new Reverend Perwe. This Jew-lover built up around himself a clique of fifth columnists against the regime and forgot in his zeal his real Christian calling, to be a neutral link between the church and all the members of the congregation. Those Swedes who felt this uncomfortable atmosphere built up their own group, the Swedish Socialist Congregation, which still remained a part of the Swedish Church, as the little piece of Sweden that it felt like.

I joined the folk dance group, but the priest did not at all like the pin that held my scarf together. It was a silver broach that my father had sawn from a silver coin to an open sunwheel. I answered frankly that the pin belonged to the folk costume of Blekinge and that it is suitable there.

The "shunned" people could however through their solidarity with pressure on the German and Swedish Red Cross ensure a fair distribution of the food packages that came to all the Swedish-Germans directly from Sweden. Before this pressure, the packages were distributed arbitrarily.

The packages and their contents were a real source of joy with their somewhat unusual dietary supplements. But no one wanted the Swedish coffee substitute because the German one was much better. Real coffee was allotted in small rations on the weekends, which made them special occasions for Mother and Grandmother in the pantry in Friedenau. We graciously picked up pancake flour, cooking oil, margarine, rolled oats, semolina, etc. for a small fee from the Swedish Church after we got a message from the Red Cross.

* * * *

The Swedish Church in Berlin did not have the "Our Father garage appearance" of today in the form of a square brick building. Instead it was a really magnificent building with a church tower in the park, which gave the building on *Landhausstraße* a churchly touch inside the high, richly ornamented iron gates. The entrance on the main street facing the park was ornamented with the Swedish coat of arms, Three Crowns.

I took the double decker, that is to say the bus with two decks, from my home in Steglitz to get there. I learned to take the bus when I was 6 years old, just like city kids get used to doing, and I saw bus routes as a natural part of life. I sometimes hid behind the steps up to the upper deck and saved my ticket money for candy. Many "Schaffners" saw my plan and turned a blind eye to my trick, but every so often an ardent driver took payment with the words "You don't do that", but I cannot remember getting a direct reprimand.

I liked to go to the Swedish Church, but the atmosphere of friendliness and understanding diminished more and more. I am very sorry that I was not mature enough to understand what went on and was not able to do something to make sure that this piece of Sweden had remained free from various fifth columnists who to this very day at home in Sweden seriously brag about their undermining exploits against the host-country's regime. I lived in the naïve belief that friendship, like Swedish-Germans, was honest, reliable and honourable, without reservation. I could not believe that amongst these "Christian Swedes" there could be inside enemies who worked underground with the outside ones, at the same time as they lived under the protection and responsibility of the German regime.

When the truth was revealed to me, it was too late.

* * * *

The first real let-down came in the winter/spring of 1945. The Church transformed into a meeting place for Swedish descendants who would be sent to Sweden through Lübeck in cooperation with the Swedish Church there.

The church in Berlin was now led by a little repulsive swarthy type: Reverend Myrgren. Obviously instigated by the retreating German front, he boasted about how many "Nazi-Swedes" he managed to deport. Amongst them was a family with several children whose parents had been connected to the Ministry of Propaganda.

I was quite offended when he declared that he was prepared to raise the Swedish flag to welcome the Red Army's impending assault on

the country's capital. All this while the Berliners built barricades to stop the assaulting Bolshevik hordes that a few weeks later would plunder, rape, and desecrate Berlin in a way incomparable to any other episode in history. Upset, I impulsively left the church gathering to apply at a "Volksturm" recruiting office, but sexual discrimination was still widely spread in Europe when it came to women's abilities to fight, and I was rejected.

As a matter of curiosity, I can mention that the Reverend Myrgren, in a long interview in the Swedish newspaper *Kristianstadsbladet* a few decades ago, still boasted about his exploits, but that he bitterly regretted helping Vera Oredsson, who is now married to the leader of the Swedish Nazis, Göran Oredsson, to come to Sweden.

He can save that regret. I have never needed a reverend's help to come to Sweden. I have always been able to travel here whenever I wanted, and when it comes to his "helping" me and other Swedish descendants, the truth is this: National Minister Heinrich Himmler negotiated with Count Folke Bernadotte at that very time of the evacuation of Jews to Sweden during the Allies' bombings, even of the internment camps. Himmler was informed of the Swedish Church's plots and sorting of Swedish-Germans according to their political views. Himmler was infuriated and roared at Folke Bernadotte that all negotiations of the evacuation of Jews were terminated. Folke Bernadotte was dismayed over the information and made it known that no differences were made here. All Swedish-Germans shall be allowed to travel to Sweden. So Reverend Myrgren's efforts are marginal at best.

The Swedish Church in Berlin, where I was once baptized, was burned by the Allies. Myrgren did not need to raise the Swedish flag. But I guess he was satisfied when he could watch, later on in the newsreels, how the swastika banners were dragged around in the dirt, in Communism's and democracy's dung pools.

Dopattest.

År 19 28 (nittonhundra tjugoåtta)
den 21 febr. 1928 föddes
i Berlin
och den 28 okt 19 28
döptes i Svenska kyrkan
af Fredrik Sebardt :

Taufschein.

Im Jahr 19 28 (Neunzehnhundertachtundzwanzig)
am 21 Febr wurde
in Berlin geboren
und am 28 okt. 19 28
wurde in der Schwedischen Kirche
von Fredrik Sebardt getauft:

Vera Marta Birgitta

Betygar
svenska Victoriaförsamlingen
i Berlin.

Bescheinig.
schwedische Viktoriagemeinde
in Berlin.

Berlin-Friedenau, den 28. 10 19 28

Fredrik Sebardt
Legations-Pastor.

Vera's baptism certificate from the Swedish church, Victoria congregation, in Berlin.

The Starling and the Olympics

Once more I would like to mention the beautiful parks in Berlin where, in the spring, the singing of the birds drowns out all the other sounds between the trees and the bushes. Father had a great interest in birds and he taught me the names of many birds and how to recognize their songs, knowledge that I have carried with me all my life and which gives me great joy to this very day.

I was eight years old in the year of the Olympic Games of 1936. I do not remember much about the sporting events or the athletes' achievements, but Leni Riefenstahl's film gives a complete history of the event for future generations. It shows the ideal of beauty and the lust for life as they are envisioned by the National Socialist ideology. Besides Leni Riefenstahl's film there are also many picture books about the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin that document this epoch in German history, and of course the editions from before 1945 are the ones that contain genuine content and truth.

What does a starling, or more correctly, a couple of starlings, have to do with the Olympics? The Olympics are otherwise merely associated with the introductory dove cavalcade, but not so in my memory.

* * * *

My father had taken care of a couple of starling chicks that he had found piteously peeping under a ruined birdhouse in the park. He took them home and took care of them tenderly in the storage room. With a sewing machine lamp and a bed of cotton batting, they had a comfy nest and were fed with a pair of tweezers. The starlings survived and were influenced by their human surroundings.

As most people know, starlings are imitative birds that, like parrots and budgies, can learn to say a few words or shorter sentences. But even birds are individuals. Father taught them a few bars from a simple Swedish folk song. One of them whistled happily while the other just managed to a certain point about half way through. The better bird noticed its superiority and "boasted" by repeating the song, which made the lesser bird angry and they started to fight. We had a lot of fun with them.

During the Olympics we had a couple of journalists from Karlshams Allehanda in Sweden staying at our place. They were our relatives and owners of the newspaper, which was a conservative newspaper in Blekinge.

There was a festive mood in Berlin. One morning Uncle Bengt and I sat in the living room listening to the starlings as they sang and fought about different things. Uncle Bengt was impressed by their singing a Swedish folk song, but the birds had also learned a few words (!) ...and when Uncle Bengt went to study them a little closer and approached the cage, they fell silent, but one of them said loud and clear “Heil Hitler!” Uncle Bengt furrowed his brow in dismay and said: “Cut that out!” ...“Heil Hitler!” the bird replied. He turned quickly to me and said almost terrified: “Now things have gone too far! Have even the birds started to say ‘Heil Hitler’ in this country?” We laughed at his wonder and consternation. He knew that starlings could whistle and learn melodies, but not that they could even learn to talk like parrots can.

Shortly after the Olympics the starlings were released into the park and I often wonder if any of the visitors strolling through the park have ever heard the Swedish folk song or suddenly noticed a “Heil Hitler” from the tree tops.

The talkative starling.

The Streamers

The sun may have been shining on May 1, 1938, but that day my legs, in their short, white socks that belonged to the HJ uniform, had goose bumps on them from the cold cutting wind. Despite that, my mood was at the height of excitement. I was now going to see the Führer for real. I had however a memory of seeing him on January 30, 1933 in the torchlight procession when I was just 5 years old and was mostly fascinated by the rhythmic steps of the SA boots, the march music, and the songs.

Now I was going to see him and listen to him speak at the Olympic stadium and I was on my way to the S-bahn station where our group would go together. Laughing and singing, healthy and happy German children and youth, united in their belief in the future and lust for life, filled the train cars.

The Olympic stadium! We were there. Lots of youngsters in the HJ uniform's brown jackets filled the seats of the arena to the very last seat. One down-side was that I ended up belonging to the group of youngsters who were to take off their jackets. The cold cutting wind made me shiver even more, and in my thin white blouse I had a hard time understanding the information that came from the leaders, but all of a sudden I read across the whole stadium the word "*Grossdeutschland*" (Great Germany). It had been formed with brown letters. The ones who got seats where they could keep their jackets on were lucky!

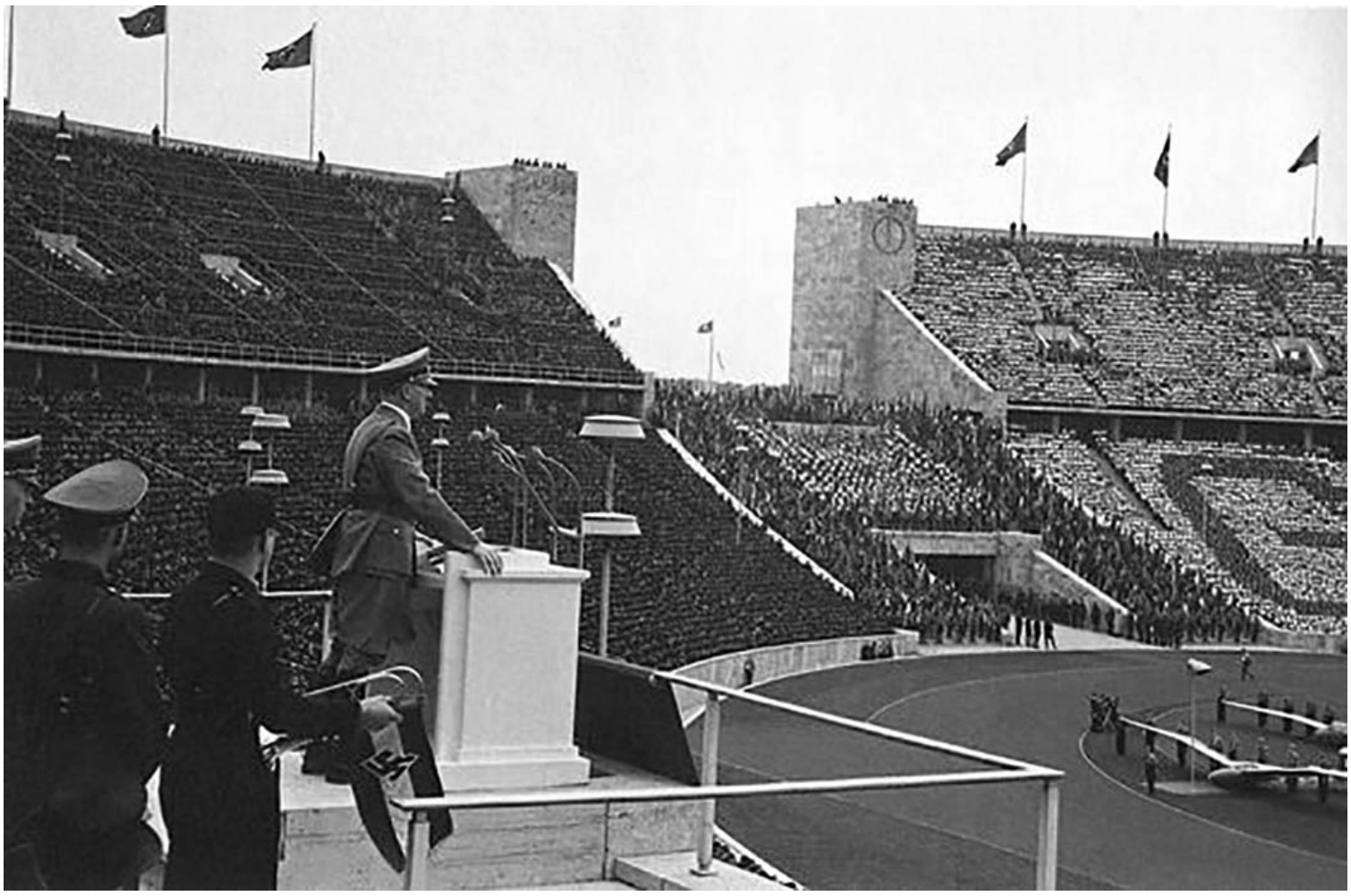
And the streamers around the bleachers flapped in their happy colours—the song arose—our youth hymn—and in rolled the well-known Mercedes convertible with a standing, smiling man. An incredible, infinite cheer broke out! What a day. The sun started to warm things up, including our hearts, over all this happiness and lust for life.

The Führer's speech was interrupted continually by our cheers and now that I am older I have understood that Adolf Hitler had to improvise his speech a fair bit because we cheered about everything he said. When he mentioned the Communists, we cheered and when he mentioned the opposition we cheered. Those listening to the radio probably got a heart-warming laugh when the speech changed out of its rhythm, and the Führer may have experienced that when he was talking to the youth, he should not use too many complicated political terms. Not that it hurt anything, but the opposition, in their

zealous ability to misrepresent things, probably wished to impute to the rest of the world something that was not at all meant. This is exactly what happened with the song we youth sang so often: "Today Germany hears us... Tomorrow the whole world will hear us". This is misinterpreted to "Today Germany belongs to us... Tomorrow the whole world will belong to us". This song was later banned because of this perpetual "misunderstanding" that the rest of the world put in their propaganda.

But all good things must come to an end, as even this experience of May 1, 1938. We gathered in line-ups for food and the trip home. A good Eintopf stew, which consisted of meat and vegetables, was served. The banners were rolled up and the trip home began. A wonderful day full of memories for a lifetime was over.

I will never understand what was so dangerous with the Hitler Youth. It was a movement built on character, healthiness, joy, and beauty. These are goals that should be worth aiming at for all the youth in the world, in contrast to what we are facing today, as we are on the threshold of a new millennium. Why can one not naturally tell whoever: "I remember when I was a member of the Hitler Youth"? This should not be something to keep quiet about, when the truth about the Hitler Youth is told as it really was and not as it is described in the propaganda lies put out by the victors and the enemies.



Adolf Hitler speaking at the Olympic Stadium, 1938.

Vera, 10 years old, 1938.

Sammeltassen

This word is difficult to translate from German, but it means "a manic collecting of coffee cups," and in porcelain shops one could order "Eine Sammeltasse" as a present or to one's own collection. A bunch of beautiful cups and saucers, unique in their design and colour, were then displayed.

My choice of titles for this chapter derives from what I am about to tell about my experiences with a West Prussian farmer's daughter by the name of Friedel Keller. I will here retell what she told me. I cannot think about her without also thinking about her beautiful coffee cups, which she set the table with on special occasions. A long table was covered with a shiny damask cloth and covered with several of her decorative coffee cups and saucers. One could tell that she was proud of her collection, which she managed to save from the Polish mob's destructiveness during those awful days at the end of August, 1939.

* * * *

The farms in central Europe lie, like in Sweden before the days of the mapping department, in groups and the fields were adjacent to the villages. Friedel Keller's farm was situated in the village of Kruschdorf, about 20 km outside of Bromberg. The name "Bromberg" cannot be mentioned to the older generation of Germans without it causing shivers to run up and down their spines. In Bromberg the Polish performed a murder orgy on the German population that can only be compared to what is today described as the ethnic genocide going on in former Yugoslavia. The pogroms in Bromberg caused the German invasion and liberation on September 1, 1939, which put an end to the bestial riots.

Kruschdorf, a village on a ridge by the Bromberg Channel, consisted of a church, an inn, and a country estate that was located right by the church and the barns. The farms were owned by both Germans and Poles, but predominantly by Germans.

One could clearly see the difference between the German and Polish farms. In front of the German farms, along the street of the village, there were dazzling little gardens with flower beds. Inside the houses were wooden floors or stone floors in the kitchen area. At the fronts of the Polish farms there were no yards and the houses had dirt floors.

There was something special about Friedel Keller's farm. Even if the farm's red brick looked like that on the other farms, the house's gable showed off a veranda with colourful lead windows where the sunbeams danced. Her yard in front of the veranda was the apple of her eye. Enclosed by a fence and locked gate, no one was allowed into her yard without her permission.

Friedel was not a particularly distinctive down-to-Earth "farm girl". She was more orientated towards the beautiful and decorative, but her mother ruled with an iron hand, and neither sloppiness nor laziness were tolerated. The combination was surely needed and the best for both the running of the farm and the comfort of the home.

* * * *

At one of the well-laid coffee parties on the farm, Friedel Keller told us about how she survived the Polish mob in those August days of 1939. The Polack's irritation and spitefulness intensified and got worse and worse every day. German men just "disappeared" and German children were harshly bullied and lived in constant fear. She said:

We worked more intensively, like some sort of therapy that kept us from worrying and feeling a nerve-wracking panic. But the worry we felt when a family member was away on an important errand gnawed at us and disturbed the rhythm of the day, given that we continually interrupted our duties and looked down the road of the village or continually looked out the window. In our evening prayers we prayed deep down, 'Dear God, send us the soldiers from the Reich and bring us peace and freedom'.

To be on the safe side, we hid some of our possessions under the wooden floor of the veranda and covered the hole with dirt so that in case of a fire-raising, they wouldn't get damaged. Only Mother and I knew about the hiding place. So late one afternoon, just after finishing the afternoon milking, they came! Howling and screaming a whole armada of insulting words, tens of dozens of them rushed into the yard. Everything was to be smashed to pieces they said, but Mother, who spoke fluent Polish, answered, 'Smashing and destroying everything doesn't give you any profit, does it? Why not take what you want instead!' These surprising words from my mother left them speechless and calmed them down before the plundering began. When it was over, they tied us up to the wagon wheel outside in the yard. At that very moment, a troop of Polish soldiers rode into the yard and the leader of the troop wondered what was going on. We were relieved

because we hoped that the soldiers were disciplined, in contrast to the mob. But we were mistaken.

Sure, the order was given to free us from the wagon wheel, but instead we were to be bound to the solid wooden legs of the kitchen table and the farm was to be burned to the ground. There we sat, Mother and I, and looked at each other in agreement: 'Don't show your fear. Don't cry. Don't show any weakness'. But good grief how close to panicking we were!

Suddenly the leader of the troop called out: 'Untie them and bring them here!' We were pushed into the room. The leader of the group pointed at the wall and the picture hanging there. It was a portrait of Pilsudski, the Polish Head of State. 'This saves your lives,' he said. 'He is my idol.' And so the mob and the soldiers left us and our farm, but our hands and feet were once again tied tightly. The terror we felt may have left a bit, but we wondered how all this would end. After about an hour, Ratz Werner, a neighbour, came sneaking in. He untied us and we snuck, ducking along the thicket and the ditches, out to the forest and the darkness of the night. Here and there the sky was lit up by burning houses and farms, but many people from our village had gotten out in time and, like us, had escaped into the forest to camps with security guards in out-of-the-way glades.

Mother told me later that she looked at the picture of Pilsudski in terror and hoped that the Polish troop leader wouldn't take it down or turn it around, because on the other side was a picture of the Führer. The picture was turned around to be on the safe side.

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Our time in the forest was not very comfortable, and every now and then one of the courageous people snuck back to the village to get supplies from what remained of his home.

* * * *

A few days into September, my mother resolutely took a cow and made her way to our farm. It was silent and remarkably calm in the village when Mother arrived at the farm, but when she was at the height of her rummaging, she heard a deafening rumble in the yard and instead of quickly sneaking away, she sang a Polish song at the top of her lungs, thinking that the Polacks were once again visiting the farm. 'After days in the forest I looked awful and dirty, least of all I looked like the farmer's wife', interjected Mrs. Röseler.

Mother sang at the top of her lungs to mislead what she thought were the Polish troops or mob, when a strong voice roared out in

German: 'What's going on here?!' She stood in front of the pantry and quickly turned around. A German soldier was standing there with his rifle threateningly pointed at her. She got quite a shock, but quickly pulled herself together and got angry instead: 'Here we've been longing for you, praying for you, and picturing your arrival as liberating, being greeted with flowers and song, but instead you point your weapon at me! I am Mrs. Röseler and I own this farm!' A couple of officers came in and looked suspiciously at the dirty woman standing on the step below. 'Come here,' said one of them gruffly, and Mother followed them into the room.

He pointed at the portrait of Pilsudski and wondered if this really was a German farm. Mother turned the picture around and asked sharply: 'Is this better? But I'll say this: Pilsudski will remain on the back side of this picture for as long as I live because he saved both the farm and our lives.' She told the officers and the group of German soldiers that had gathered around the whole story. Some of them were ordered to follow her into the forest to get the rest of us, but that wasn't necessary. Our guards had already seen the German soldiers and met them with shouts of joy.

What a day it was. We got help with the clean-up, and food and drink. There are no words to express our joy. The swastika banners came out of nowhere, decorated with flowers, and were raised. We searched for our poor animals that had run into the field.

There were no limits to our grief when we were able to bury our murdered neighbours and villagers who hadn't managed to escape the Polish mob. In Bromberg, where my sister and her daughter live, it was even worse. The Polish masses had carried out an indiscriminate witch-hunt on all Germans. Children, women, and even pets were broken on the wheel, stoned, and assaulted to death.

Ugh, no, don't let us ruin our coffee party with these horrid memories. But I will never again speak Polish, not even with the maids and farmhands. Mother will have to do that," said Friedel Keller.

* * * *

I looked at the picture of the Führer that hung on the wall, recalling the picture on the back side, and my gaze wandered over the table and the beautiful coffee cups that were saved and a few new ones. Friedel's friends knew that a beautiful cup was always a welcome present, even from the liberators who sometimes came by and said hello. Outside the window on the school's flagpole waves the

swastika banner, shining in the late summer sun. The top of the pole is decorated with flowers. The people celebrated the anniversary of their liberation.

The Small Angels

From a hill in my place of residence, Kruschdorf, located outside of Bromberg, one could vaguely see the church tower in Lochowo.

Whenever the name of that village was mentioned, a creepy, gloomy atmosphere was spread, clearly noted by unknowing visitors. If Bromberg was talked about, all the horrible assaults on the German citizens around the end of August and beginning of September, 1939, were eagerly described. But Lochowo showed reactions of horror, women holding back their tears, while the men's faces took on looks of hate and anger, which is why questions from the curious were cut off by saying not to pour salt in open wounds. But from what I have learned from the stories of eyewitnesses I can put together the documented events:

The village of Lochowo lies a little out of the way in a valley with surroundings of agriculture, pine forests, and sandy plains that are typical of West Prussia. There is a simple road that runs through the community with the low brick houses where the church is the dominating feature. It is an ordinary village with pecking hens, ducks, and noisy geese that waddle through the village.

One morning in August-September, all hell broke loose. An undisciplined rabble of Polish soldiers stopped their vehicles in the middle of the village and wreaked havoc there for several days, stirring up the Polacks in the village, who earlier had lived together harmoniously with their German neighbours, worked for them or together with them. Now they were changed beyond recognition, and who it was who came up with the horrible idea that all the German children in the village should be slaughtered (yes, the children) before their parents' eyes, no one knew. But the mob forced all the children out into the open spot in the village and started a bloodbath of such human degradation that it can hardly be described. It is possible that the Polish-Catholic population's eagerness in their faith had turned over so far that they felt called upon to follow Herrod's decree about child-killing with the aim of killing the Jesus child according to the Bible, and instead now kill the German children. Babies were torn out of their mothers' arms without taking any consideration to their desperate pleas for mercy. The German entry and liberation came, and what these soldiers got to see caused their reaction and the first punishments. Those who took part in the murders were executed. Those who tried to get away

with it were captured and identified by one of the German girls who had survived the massacre.

One could tell that this village missed its children. They lay in the cemetery, marked with their names and ages ranging from a few months to their early teens. I visited the cemetery with my father and brother in 1941. The gravestones told the unanimous date for the killings.

In this village the swastika banner was hung on the festive occasions, always adorned with flowers and a thin, black ribbon to mark the joy of their liberation and the commemoration of the murdered children.

* * * *

A few years ago I got convincing proof of how the distortion of history in "our" mass media is then carried out. In a so-called documentary about the German entry into Poland, there are film clips that show how a German girl outside of Lochowo identifies the Polacks she wants to see shot for the German soldiers. Nothing more!

I called SVT, *Swedish Radio and Television*, to protest, but received no understanding. I wrote a letter to my brother, Folke Schimanski, an employee of SVT, and reminded him about our visit together with our father to Lochowo's cemetery in 1941. Surely he could object to this and tell the truth. I just got the reply: "At SVT we follow the principle that in the struggle against Fascism, even lies are allowed." And from my mother I got scolded because my behavior could "ruin Folke's career, etc."

However, every time I light a candle on someone's grave, my thoughts go to those little angels in the out-of-the-way village outside of Bromberg, whose gravestones were undoubtedly obliterated a long time ago.

Ice Crystals

One cold November day in 1940 my mother lugged my 4-year-old brother and I and several travel bags through Berlin. Our goal was Anhalter Bahnhof. The S-Bahn, as the local railway was called, was crowded with school-aged children and their luggage. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Dr. Josef Goebbels, had ordered that all school-aged children and some of their teachers leave Berlin. The mood at the train station was a little subdued in this situation because parents and children did not know how long they would be apart. I, on the other hand, was not going to miss what I was leaving behind in the slightest. I was looking forward to being liberated from my torturous homework drillings in the evenings, followed by getting my ears boxed and being scolded.

When the papers about the evacuation came to my class at school and we were to take them home to our parents to be signed, I hoped from the bottom of my heart that my parents would sign them and approve of the minister's decision. I had no feelings of any great love from my parents, so my hoping should not be anything shameful. They signed the papers and KLV became the organization I would belong to for the next two years.

As an aside I can mention that even England had a similar organization, but after seeing a documentary on TV about it a few years ago, I thought it was awful. They used the principle of selection, which meant that the children gathered on the platform at the train station and people who wanted to house these children were allowed to pick the children they wanted to house. As a result, those children who did not look attractive to the villagers were the ones who ended up with the village school teachers or the priest for further steps. I thought this was a grim and inconsiderate way of dealing with the situation, without the least little bit of organization.

The German children who had relatives or close friends in rural areas were of course allowed to stay with them (if they wanted to). Others stayed in Berlin with their parents.

My departure was, in other words, not a sentimental one. Instead it was full of sheer curiosity over what was to come, plus a feeling of travel fever towards new adventures as I looked at my large suitcase that shook and hopped to the rhythm of the railway curves in Berlin, which were still not in ruins. My suitcase was full of new things,

carefully packed by my mother, who was very careful to give her daughter a certain status amongst her schoolmates.

"Anhalter Bahnhof" was heard over the loudspeakers and we eagerly pressed on towards our respective trains that were carefully assigned to us in our papers. All the gloomy mood from our departure had now completely vanished. We were met by marching music, joyful acclamations, flags, paper flowers, and streamers that decorated the trains. My class, or I should say a part of it, was put in the trust of one of our well-known teachers and two of the official functionaries from the Hitler Youth, two young women in their 20s. The orchestra played a tune that was even well-known to the Swedes: "Mussi den zum städtele hinaus" (it later became a popular song recorded by Elvis Presley, "Wooden heart"), and the train pulled away with its usual huffing and puffing, as steam engines do.

* * * *

To Shleisen, Annaberg, one of Germany's historically heroic places known for its freedom-fighters against the Polish suppression during centuries of conquest from the Polish side. Five of us girls in the train compartment found each other right away. There was a succession of song and laughter. The different stops along the way provided entertainment courtesy of the local Hitler Youth organizations. Everything was well-organized down to the finest detail.

Helga, a blond girl with lively blue eyes who was born outside of marriage, had a mother who adored her and who knew all the lyrics to the songs that in Sweden were called chapbook songs because they were printed and sold for a few shillings at that time. They were at the same time humorous, gruesome, and captivating.

Eva seemed to be a simple and calm individual who we did not know that well, given that she was from a different class at our school.

Erika, well-built, stylish, and dark-haired, came from a highly-educated family, and Ilse, medium-blonde, freckled and jovial, who with her Berlin dialect and dry humour, had the potential to be our favourite companion at all times. She had already treated us to many a good laugh with real humour at school.

I remember so well when one of our teachers explained the purpose of nose hairs as dust filters to prevent dust from entering our lungs. Ilse waved eagerly with her hand and shouted happily with her genuine Berlin dialect that cannot be translated into English: "In my

uncle's nose they looked out..." Both the students and teachers laughed so much that the tears ran down our cheeks. Or when we, before our KLV trip, were examined by the doctor and had to leave the obligatory urine test. Embarrassed and shy, we handed over our samples to the stern nurse. Not Ilse. She handed over her bowl with the words: "There's a little shit in it too". This caused the stern nurse to lose her composure for a split second, but she was able to make a disapproving look. But the rest of us could of course not help but laugh.

* * * *

Despite our different backgrounds we got along really well and became known amongst the others as "the hedgehogs" during our time on the KLV trip when we were in the same camp. I do not know why, but our clique did not mind the expression.

During our journey, with regrouping and extra trains, and different stations in the long region of Schlesien, we got quite tired and the desire to stretch out and sleep came over us all more and more, but all trips come to an end, and thus even this one. We arrived at our destination and the foggy landscape greeted us shivering and perhaps pale travelers. A group of nuns and a municipal leader in uniform greeted us in a friendly way and at that small station there was a horse and carriage waiting for us. The driver took care of our luggage.

We had a short walk to our camp, which was situated in a convent beside a refugee camp for refugees from the Baltic, and their kitchen was to provide us with food. We were about 20 girls who were now to be given room and board, and we five who had become a clique were to share two rooms up in one of the towers of the convent. The wood-burning stoves spread their warmth over newly-made and clean beds. We were surprised by the height of the mattresses on the small beds. But we were disappointed when the height soon sank down and we discovered that the mattresses were filled with straw. We took everything well and slept splendidly.

The next day we unpacked and put our things in the closet. We thought it was exciting up in our tower which was closed off by a glass door that was directly connected to a narrow staircase. We had to do all the cleaning ourselves and were encouraged to decorate our Spartan room so that it did not look like a convent cell. The wood-burning stoves were looked after by older Baltic girls from the

neighbouring camp. As is common for youngsters, we soon felt at home in our unusual environment.

* * * *

Winter arrived with snow, cold, and glittering ice crystals on our window panes. We were fascinated by these changing patterns that were created by the warmth from the wood-burning stoves. We were strictly forbidden to touch the fire, but the ban was difficult to follow when Helga received her every-third-day package from her mother, containing amongst other things apples, which we secretly roasted over the fire in the stoves. Helga generously shared the contents of her package with the rest of us.

Of course our time was taken up with duties like schoolwork, cleaning, etc., but there was time left over for mischief. Lots of mischief, one might think, given that our levels of inventiveness were high, most of all Helga's. One time it almost went bad, quite badly, for us. We five in the tower were quite isolated from our other friends, and we did not keep such close tabs on what was happening in the lower areas. After each cleaning of our section it was time for the inspection by our HJ (Hitler Youth, translator's note) functionaries. We often placed discarded sinks and bowls from the storage room in front of the door and let them roll down the stairs, making the noise that such material does when that happens. Sure, we were punished for our pranks with toilet cleaning, snow shoveling and the like while our other comrades were allowed to play games and partake in other leisure activities, but we could not resist. But that time!

But that time the stainless steel bowls started their clattering down the stairs, the noise was not met by high-pitched women's voices, but by manly ones that wondered what in the h--l was going on. Amongst the upset words we heard our teachers' apologies and explanations. We sat on our chairs in front of our beds, pale and afraid. Terrified of what our prank had caused, our laughter was stuck in our throats and Erika was almost ready to crawl under her bed when the door was thrown open and outside stood our teacher with two high-ranking KLV functionaries, their faces red with anger. But obviously the sight of our terrified beings made them calm down a bit and just said: "So, this is what you look like, the ones who are responsible for the undisciplined behaviour in this camp". Nothing more was said, and after that episode, our pranks of this sort on our HJ functionaries came to an end. But they did not completely cease.

There were other things that interplayed between our dispositions and Helga's ingenuity.

As I mentioned earlier, our catering was provided by the Baltic people, and their diet was certainly not like ours. Sometimes it was quite simply inedible. Have you tried duck egg gruel before? Lucky you! It tastes like something between beer posset (which people from the Swedish island of Gotland are supposed to love) and fermented Baltic herring, when it comes to the smell. The thick, yellow gruel with its stale smell made one feel ill just by it coming in the vicinity of one's nose, and swallowing it was like eating vomit. But our teacher would not be bribed when it came to food. It was to be eaten and that was that. The HJ functionaries towed the line. The teacher herself ate the gruel. I do not know if she did that with a good appetite or with good acting abilities, but when she was finished, she left the table with the words, "Now remain seated until the tureen and your plates are empty". She locked the dining area and there we sat, 20 girls who felt ill because of that so-called human food.

What to do with that nauseating soup? Throw it out the window? No, the snow would reveal our prank. But then Helga came up with a brilliant idea. In the nearby closet there were a bunch of hot water bottles hanging. Rubber bottles with good screw caps. She pointed out that they were large and easy to fill. Even our HJ leaders were with us about the idea of liberating us from the soup by pouring it into the bottles. We completed the maneuver while one of us listened by the door in case our teacher came back. It all went well, but our teacher probably wondered why there was so much running back and forth to the closet that particular night. It was not the sudden coldness that was the cause, but a certain emptying in the toilets and the rinsing that caused the activity.

Vera, 12 years old, 1940.

The youth were sent off with paper flags, streamers, and marching music.

The Conspiracy

In St. Annaberg's KLV camp we bonded together to form a good comradeship. There were of course squabbles amongst 20-some teenagers between the ages of 12 and 14, but there were never any big quarrels between us. (Articles about "the silent opponents" in the Third Reich were often published. These now brag about sabotage and tactics in their daily work that were aimed at damaging the regime, all from behaving arrogantly towards foreign guests to spreading rumours and unrest to the rest of the population. Unconsciously I rendered a couple of these parasites harmless but did not understand that until later when I followed the articles in a Swedish newspaper.)

A couple of aunts to two of my camping mates who were cousins visited our camp just before Christmas. They were warmly welcomed by our teacher and the HJ functionaries, and we admired in parentheses these well-dressed middle-aged beings. But something happened. Our comradeship was disturbed and we "hedgehogs" were for some reason rejected by the intimate circle that had taken shape in the lower corridors. In the evenings the aunts organized so-called story times for the girls downstairs, but we five upstairs were not allowed to join them. The atmosphere felt spiteful and artificial, and became in an unexplainable way destructive.

One evening out of curiosity (and perhaps jealousy of the chosen ones) I snuck downstairs to listen to the "story time". I carefully cracked open the closed door of the room where the girls sat around on pillows in front of the two aunts. They were not telling stories! No, they were making a long, intense row of dirty attacks on the camp in general and the KLV more specifically. The aunts' well-painted lips were throwing dirt on our oasis. Upset and with sudden speed I went to the HJ leader's room and told on them. With some disbelief from her side we snuck back down to the slightly ajar door and my words were confirmed. There was a real commotion! The leaders were contacted and the elegant ladies were taken away in disbelief by uniformed men. The two cousins were expelled immediately. They had to pack up and return home. The good mood soon returned to the camp but with one difference: we hedgehogs became somewhat of favourites.

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Christmas came and all the quarrels were soon forgotten with all the preparation.

At the beginning of December comes St. Nikolaus Day, which according to German tradition is an encouraging element for all children. They put their newly polished shoes outside the door where "Nikolaus" fills them with all kinds of goodies. In our convent there was one difference: we had to put our shoes in our bags to prevent the mice from getting to the goods.

During Advent we were woken up one night by a covered truck that drove in low gear, sneaking up towards our convent. But a truck's engine can always be heard, even when good attempts are made to cover it up, so we looked out the window with great curiosity, but were ordered to immediately leave the windows and go back to bed. But we kept listening and wondered what on Earth a covered truck was doing here. Even the unloading of it sounded a little creepy. What was happening? After some clattering the truck drove away and the explanation to it all was given on Christmas Day. After breakfast we were all ordered to go down to the cellar, where we found new toboggans, skis, and poles. With a cry of joy we supplied ourselves two by two with toboggans. Erika would rather go skiing, but Eva and I went tobogganing down the many hills in St. Annaberg. There was plenty of snow and Christmas Eve went by quickly until evening came and it was time for the Christmas tree, candles, and many presents from home.

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During the time between Christmas and New Year we met a farmer with a team of horses, which with a loud neigh stopped and asked those of us who were on our way to the tobogganing hills with our toboggans if we were good tobogganers, to which we of course replied with a loud "Yes!" We told him that we knew all about how to move from right to left, slow down and stop, which is done with the heels of one's boots and we Berlin kids are somewhat of experts at it. We then bound our toboggans in a long chain one after the other behind the team and they towed us away with cheers and songs by our camp and of course it was Helga who provided the funniest contributions. As usual she had been the source of some tricks and was ordered to clean the toilets instead of coming with us to the hills. She heard our laughter and came running out with the round toilet brush high above her head, threw herself on the last bit of space in the last toboggan and marked our curves from left to right with the

brush. The villagers stood along the roads and howled with laughter, something that was rather unusual for the otherwise so rugged people of Schlesien.

Lost

Many small, clear streams that have carved deep grooves in the landscape run through St. Annaberg. They ran despite the cold and created ice crystals that cold January day in 1941. We five girls walked along the streams and watched the bubbles under the ice that was clear as glass. We talked about the birds and the bees, something that Erika and Helga knew more about than Eva and me. Helga and Erika talked while Eva made dreadful comments, but I thought it sounded logical from my own observations and fragments from the adult conversations I have heard. Ilse wanted to make some cheeky additions, but Erika asked her to keep her dirty Berlin mouth shut. Erika had authority and was most often obeyed.

I cannot remember more about their surnames than that Helga's ended in -ski like mine. Eva and Ilse had typical German professional names, while Erika was proud to have a "von" name.

As an adult I am grateful that I got explanations and insights into adult life in this natural and respectful way, which can be quite troublesome for a woman. My wish to never become a woman was a somewhat hasty prayer, because we had gotten lost in the stream gullies, which branched out endlessly. When we climbed up the sides, we saw nothing but forest and fields, no houses and no roads. To top it all off it started to snow, which reduced our visibility to almost nothing. We walked and walked and froze! Helga tried to pep us with her chapbook songs, and I got asked about Sweden. Their questions took me back to an experience I had by the river in Mörrum in 1937. I was staying with a teacher and together with a girl from the neighbourhood we walked along the river on a beautiful summer day. In front of us in the distance there was a loony who was mumbling to himself. I wanted to turn around. I have always felt uncomfortable around that type of person in Sweden, where one could meet them every now and then, but they were never seen in Germany. My friend calmed me down and said that this loony was totally harmless and inoffensive, so we continued on our walk. But just as we passed him, this really ugly figure hollered and lifted a big rock to throw at us. We ran for our lives! I learned a lesson: do not trust the mentally ill no matter how much the people around me say that the person is harmless.

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The darkness began to fall. Tired and down-hearted, we stumbled through the snow, when we suddenly saw a few tiny rays of light and the contours of a road. We recognized where we were, and our arrival at the village where the residents had just been informed by our leaders of our disappearance, which caused worry and commotion, was met with great relief. We avoided squabbling and reproaches in our rather poor condition, and were put straight to bed. Erika, Helga, and Ilse were soon on their feet again, but Eva and I caught bad colds with high fever and thus received medical attention and care from our leaders. After all, they were responsible for us and took this opportunity as a tough test with an almost ardent compensation of exaggerated “feelings of guilt”.

When this episode was over and our health was restored, we received a message saying that our KLV camp was being moved to northern Schlesien, to Steinau, and a newly-built youth home because our convent was not seen to be especially healthy with its thick walls. With mixed feelings we packed our things. We found out that the youth home would of course have different personnel and that we would be together with a school group from another part of Berlin.

Materially it was an improvement, with a better kitchen, with food made by its own personnel, and a large, nice common room, wonderful dining rooms with views over Oder behind the plains, hygienic shower rooms, and light rooms. But 40-some teenagers did not quite feel at home there. Our previously unified “hedgehog family” became a thing of the past in this large group. Diligent adaptation and loss of identity was the price to pay for this higher standard. Though the summer in Steinau with swimming, physical training, and lots of outdoor activities with sports and helping out on the near-by farms made us physically strong and healthy.

Between the Locks

Has the reader also felt a noticeable movement back in time in his or her life because of a scent, sound or sensation that almost causes a painful longing? That happened to me when I experienced the Borenshult locks on the Motala Canal towards Lake Boren in Sweden on a warm summer's evening.

I was suddenly 50 years back in time, when I saw youngsters diving from the lock doors down into the canal. The typical splashing sound that echoed between the lock walls when they dove, the water trickling between the logs... it all reminded me of my own and my comrades' lock pool in Steinau. It was the most fun retreat of the summer. It was not a real canal, it was a river that had been drawn through the town. We used to jump down from the lock door and let ourselves be supported by the current in the clear water. I wonder if descendants of the Polish conquerors have as much fun as we had, or if this river is also ruined and dirtied after 50 years of Communist rule and their inconsiderate destruction of the environment.

White Lilacs

Steinau in Schlesien, 1941

A Swedish wanderer would pause in astonishment at the sight that met him or her at the south end of the little Schlesien town. In the setting sun, the reddish-brown block-house shone almost Falun red (almost red ochre, translator's note). The white window frames and the white flagpole in front of the house further strengthened the similarities between it and a traditional Swedish estate building. Behind this house in a dip was a sporting facility. To the right there was a building that strongly resembled a Greek temple, but it was used as a modern gym. This was the room that could quickly be transformed into an excellent theatre.

The architect must have fancied the Swedish and Greek building styles. The melding of these gave the room a perfect unity of beauty, style, and elegance. The excess of showy white lilac bushes lining the fence around the house, the sidewalks and the other buildings gave the impression that Mother Nature wanted to give something extra of spring luxury to this particular area. The river Oder shimmered in the distance like a glittering tiara. It was a wonderful spring evening. On the steps to the block-house, our modern youth shelter, that from the outside looked so peaceful, sat our substituting Schlesien youth leader, completely dejected. Song and laughter were heard from both the main floor and upstairs. The kind Schlesien girl had never had to deal with city kids before. But this spring evening I lay quietly and listlessly in my bed while the others romped and teased each other. Our usual leaders were at a meeting and my friends took advantage of the situation. As the saying goes, "When the cat's away..."

I usually partake in all the fun, but before our superintendent went to the meeting, I had gotten both a spanking and a thorough scolding. A stranded barge in Oder had enticed me. A poorly-built raft had capsized and I had come home to our camp in awful shape. My typical bad luck. Earlier when I had ridden on an ice sheet, the same thing happened to me.

Before the sunset had taken away the colours, I felt a light vibration in the metal bed and I got up quickly. Slowly a column of tanks and trucks with soldiers came driving by on the road. We ran to the windows. "Shall we pick lilacs for them?!" someone called. With cheers and without consideration for our clothing, which was our nighties, we opened the windows, jumped out, and picked lilacs

from the over-full bushes. Bouquet after bouquet were given to the young soldiers, who started to sing. Truck after truck were honoured while we laughed and wished the soldiers luck. When the last one had driven by, we had to comfort our poor young leader and promise her that we would be good and go to bed if she would not tell the superintendent on us. We all kept our word, but ...

A few weeks later a letter came from a young lieutenant:

"Dear girls!

If you only knew what joy and encouragement you gave us when we, depressed and tired, drove through Steinau. It's not easy to leave one's home country when there's such a spring mood in the air. I myself am an orphan and have no one to grieve for me if I should fall in battle. Just then I thought that everything was meaningless. Words like 'die for your father country', 'fight for Germany' seemed so unreal to me somehow. That was the mood I was in when we drove by your beautiful youth shelter. Like a sign from above, it seemed to me, when you ran out and showered us with white lilacs. It was so wonderfully beautiful somehow, and I'm ashamed of my gloomy thoughts.

It is for you that we fight, to keep the purity, joyfulness and soundness of the German youth, for a world that needs it. As a memento from this unforgettable evening I have saved a little white lilac branch in my wallet.

I and my comrades thank you for your encouragement and the joy you have given us."

That is what the superintendent read to us at the dinner table. "And", she added, "as punishment for your disobedience, we will save up for a field post package at least once a month". That "punishment" is one we took gladly. A beautiful friendship grew between 30 girls and a lieutenant. But not many packages were sent. He was killed in battle quite early in the Russian campaign and 30 pairs of girls' eyes cried bitter tears when they received the sad news. The laughter in the camp was quietened for several days. One night a few of the girls snuck out with a wreath bound of leaves from the lilac bushes. The flowers had wilted long ago. But when the wreath, after being tossed into the river Oder, had floated away, it looked like it had started to bloom with glittering white lilacs—but maybe it was just the moonlight that reflected off of the wet leaves.

The Four-Leaf Clover

Between the two buildings, the youth shelter and the gymnasium, we girls ran and talked gaily and full of hope about the coming Youth Day, when the hall would be transformed into an elegant theatre.

The "magic", if I may call it that, with that building impresses people to this very day. The sports hall got so fully transformed that only the "shell" was recognizable.

On the Youth Day in August we were to show what we had learned and achieved in song, theatre, recital, etc. Everything was far from being political, so my number was to sing a Swedish hit song, as part of the Nordic element in the performance. I had heard a hit that was played on the radio during my visit to Sweden a couple of years earlier that was on one of the records on the spring-driven gramophones. The tune was easy and it even sounded to me as if it began in German.

The youth orchestra learned the song according to my instructions and I looked excitedly forward to my performance day. We were to rehearse a few more times before the dress rehearsal, and on the way from one of these rehearsals I shouted gladly, "Look! A four-leaf clover!" My friends started looking for more right away, but without any luck.

When we arrived to the shelter, our superintendent met us with the words, "There will be no performance for Vera. Your parents have sent a message from Berlin saying that you will be going home in a couple of days so that you can go with your father and brother on a holiday to Bromberg. Your mother, who is working at Abwehr (checking letters from Sweden during the war), must stay in Berlin". I stared angrily at the four-leaf clover! Humbug. Four-leaf clover. What rubbish!

* * * *

I did not discover that it really was a lucky clover until many, many years later when I had moved to Sweden. The hit that I knew so well was sung on a TV-show "Bei mir rist du schenn", not "schön" in German, as I understood it, but in Yiddish. Just think, I could have proudly and gladly stood there on stage and sung at the top of my lungs and danced all the steps to a Jewish-American hit that had been imported to Sweden, and that at the time was something of a protest song against Germany, in front of high-ranking National Socialist functionaries. So it really was a lucky clover after all.

Do you remember what an outcry there was in the Swedish media when the Finnish singer Arja Saijonmaa sang Zarah Leanders well-known pop songs from movies from the Third Reich at the Nobel party in Stockholm? Of all the Nazi-phobia-potentates, the journalist and politician Ingrid Segerstedt-Wiberg shouted loudest about revenge. Arja would not only be forced to publicly apologize, she would also face drastic obstacles when pursuing her career, etc.

Poppies

It was hot, very hot! The overcrowded train steamed with heat and raced together with the engine, which pulled us huffing and puffing through Schlesien towards Breslau.

I was the only one left from the Steinau camp. I would not be convinced by the director's assertions that other KLV camps were much worse than ours. We had had a wonderful time together on the vacation in Bad Schwarzenberg, a small picturesque former hostel in the mountains in, as far as Schlesien is concerned, a well-known health resort.

I visited my grandmother in a near-by sea-side resort that she occasionally visited to relieve her rheumatism. Collecting different and colourful stickers was a hobby of ours, and we took long walks through the villages, looking for them, just as the visitors to the 1994 Winter Olympics in Norway did.

* * * *

Breslau turned out to be a big city that in many ways reminded me of Berlin, with its big apartment buildings and screeching trams. On the outskirts of Breslau there was a mighty fortress that looked like a medieval fairy-tale castle with pinnacles and towers. It turned out that this was the meeting place for KLV members who wanted to stay in the organization. And what a red display of colours that surrounded the fortress! The poppy field in different stages of maturity completely dominated the surroundings. The fortress was an exciting place for us and we enjoyed our complete freedom for two weeks in this fairy-tale environment. Units met, left, and new ones arrived.

Without knowing about the properties of poppy seeds, we ate the deliciously ripe ones we found, and got intoxicated. In that state we thought we were superior to most everything and did a bunch of crazy things. We jumped off the high wood-burning stoves onto our beds with the bronze headboards and beautiful ornaments, surely antiques. All this noise prompted a thin, sharp-nosed noblewoman to suddenly appear. She was the owner of the fortress who lived in one of the wings. After consulting with the leaders, it was decided that our punishment would be to stack the wood in a wood shed, and the wood would be transported from the yard with a wheelbarrow. "And", said the strict noblewoman, "I can hear the wheels on the wheelbarrow from my open window and I want to

hear them, back and forth, so it's not worth it to be lazy! Understood?!" We understood alright, but what she had not understood was that she was dealing with clever Berlin kids. We put one piece of wood in the wheelbarrow instead of filling it, and pushed it back and forth as ordered, and had in that way turned our "punishment" into merry mischief.

* * * *

But after just two weeks our "freedom" came to an end. It was just as well. Our consumption of poppy seeds would not have been good for us in the long run. In a group of 20 girls, we came to a well-disciplined camp in Lauban with observant and experienced leaders. We could ascertain that freedom was good, but there could be too much of a good thing, so we found a security and comfort right away in our new surroundings.

Heidi

Lauban fall/winter 1941/42.

Lauban: a small town in Schlesien, an idyllic place with smaller rows of houses, where the streets are lined with hostels and lanes that blended into the well-kept gardens between the houses. Our KLV camp was located in one of these houses. This was a totally different environment than the modern youth camps in Steinau by the Oder, my previous location.

In Steinau the bedrooms had bunkbeds, about eight to ten in each room, but here in Lauban each room had three comfortable beds and a really good desk by a large window. A big cabinet with a mirror on it emphasized the hostel decor even more. A rug on the floor and a big bowl with a jug on a sturdy steel stand in white in a curtained corner made our morning and evening toiletries really private and undisturbed. There was a common bathroom with showers and toilets in secluded areas, which was different from Steinau, where everything was new and modern, but in the "everything for everyone" style where there was no integrity. The whole hostel housed about 20 girls between the ages of 13 and 14.

We had a male leader, which was quite unusual. He was a married man who lived downstairs with his family. We girls were here of our own free will from different camps in Schlesien and we were all from Berlin, but from different parts of the city. We three girls in our room were for example from a fashionable part of the city called Charlottenburg, in the middle of Berlin, the second one was from the Eastern Berlin working-class area called Moabit, and I was from Steglitz in West Berlin.

* * * *

Karin, Heidi, and I. Karin and I often quarreled. We got into arguments and heavy discussions about Sweden! Our common ties to Sweden, I with my Swedish mother and Karin with her Swedish grandmother, should have made us friends, but Karin's completely negative attitude to Sweden in general, and especially to Swedes, irritated me something awful and once we ended up in a fist fight. Heidi broke it up. She had just come into the room and shouted dismayed, "You're not a bunch of 7-year-olds! You're crazy!" Her high-pitched voice, Berlin dialect, and her frank protest surprised us so much that we, red-faced and sweating, took a breather on our

beds and stared at the otherwise so laid-back, sullen, and almost well-spoken-to-hide-her-Moabit-origins, friend.

A little calmer, Heidi continued, "You can talk a little calmer about Sweden now, the country that is for me the one without war in Northern Europe, where the capital city is Stockholm and there are many waterways, and I've read The Wonderful Adventures of Nils by Selma Lagerlöf. I don't know any more than that." Karin burst out, "No war, but they're mean! My grandmother says that they sell the poor! They sell the poor children in the villages by making them stand on a stool and selling them to mean farmers who beat them and make them work until they drop from exhaustion. My grandmother hates that country, so much so that she won't call it by name. She calls it 'a mean frost nest'. She came to Germany with my grandfather, who met her on a farm while he was on one of his many trips through the country and where she worked under horrible conditions. Grandpa fell for the blond, fine-looking woman, fell in love with her, and took her to Berlin. He thought she was too beautiful to wear herself out. They got married, for she was not only beautiful but also wise, so he never regretted it."

"How romantic!" we broke out as only teenagers do, "Tell us more!"

"I don't know that much more, other than that she had a terrible childhood. Her mother, a farmer's daughter, got kicked out of the house when her parents found out that she was pregnant outside of wedlock. Her mother died when she was nine and she was sold at an auction. Can you imagine selling children! All her life she was called illegitimate and teased because of that, until Grandpa came. Grandma always said that a beautiful eagle came from Germany and took her away to a place where she never wanted to leave. She never returned to Sweden, a frost nest full of tears and work with mean people. She warns everyone who thinks about going there."

I would not find out until much later that Karin's story was true, that poor children were auctioned off to the lowest bidder (The municipality paid child support for these children. Whoever charged the lowest fee for the child's care got to buy him or her. Translator's note), a practice that continued far into our own century. It was not wild fantasies and exaggerations she told that incited me to defend Sweden. I told her about my summers in Sweden that got me to see Swedes as friendly people and about the things I saw as amusing, like that the elderly drank their coffee from a saucer and that boys had

long hair while girls had short hair. And one should be careful with priests, I said, and Karin wondered "Why them?"

Well, during one of my summer visits between 1933 and 1939 I ended up staying with a priest in Älgarås and was treated like a slave instead of like a summer child from Berlin. Cleaning, doing dishes, and emptying different disgusting pots. "Yes! You see! That's the way they are! I was right, wasn't I?" But I continued my story about all the other summer visits. One time I stayed with a well-to-do gardener and his family of seven kids in Helsingborg. They had a wonderful summer house by the sound, where a glimpse of Denmark could be seen through the eternal sunny haze. I also told them about my experiences in Mörrum at a teacher's place and about the good cookies at the baker's place in Tidaholm. My adventures in Hälsingland during my stay with a couple in a village school. All these trips and summer holidays in Sweden for Swedish descendants were organized through the Swedish Church in Berlin.

Heidi, who was so mature in her comments despite her still undeveloped body, said with her usual laid-back High German, "Karin's grandmother talked about Sweden at the turn of the century, but everything changes. We can of course see how everything has become better in our own country in such a short time."

* * * *

Karin and I still bickered every once in awhile about Sweden, but we never really quarreled after that. We three became the best of friends, despite the saying that one person always gets left out in a threesome. Heidi's good qualities always smoothed things over. She was careful, reliable, and clean. She made our beds, which she was a master at, and she carefully folded our clothes, which was appreciated by our leaders when they came and inspected our rooms. After awhile I understood that Heidi did not have any family. She never wrote any letters home or to anyone else when we had our letter times. She never talked about herself and when we asked her questions she got sullen and surly.

Just before Christmas I wrote to my mother and asked her to divide my Christmas presents into two packages and address one to Heidi. I was not usually tender-hearted, but I could not stand the thought of Heidi finding her spot empty while the rest of us cheered and laughed as we compared our presents from our parents and other relatives.

We always had to give our letters unsealed to our HJ superintendent. He read some of them in order to get an idea of who we were and our attitudes, I think. I got called into his office, and in his hand he held my letter and talked to me in a friendly manner. "You surprise me, Vera. I would like to see this kind of comradeship amongst the National Socialists. This was really a good example. But", he continued, "we're working with Heidi's situation. She will definitely not be without presents. Her life hasn't been easy, but let that stay between us—promise! And it wasn't because of your letter that I called you here. You won't be spending Christmas with us. Instead, I've recommended that you and a couple of other frail girls spend the holiday in a recreational home in the mountains. You may not feel very fragile, but after your recent intestinal operation, you probably need a little extra care. You'll be spoiled with food, rest, spas, fresh air, and a wonderful environment. You're welcome back to us in six weeks with round cheeks and new energy."

* * * *

I came back, as he had predicted, with energy and the ability to take on new challenges. My stay at the recreational home was a real paradise. There was one episode I will never forget and that I judge as a typical National Socialist goal. We were in the waiting room awaiting our turn to the health pool. A functionary from HJ, who often checked in on us, ran quickly up the softly-carpeted marble stairs to the luxurious decor. He asked surprised why we were sitting there and waiting. His face red with anger, he saw the rope that has blocked off the first-class entrance and ordered the personnel to immediately remove the chain from the staircase and allow us entrance to the bathing area.

"Shall rich bigwigs of both genders have priority over sound German youth? We all have the right to First Class!"

The chain was taken away immediately and we were given access to the luxurious spa department that we thought was out of this world. With wide-open eyes and enchantment we entered into the spa with a solemnity as if we had been transformed into fairy-tale princesses.

Sunken marble bathtubs, artfully ornamented taps, expensive lighting... Yes, for about an hour we got to experience an existence that is otherwise only enjoyed by the so-called upper class. Nothing was impossible for National Socialism. Those of us who had enviously sat and waited for those who had had priority to the spa now felt really privileged. With this episode came new rules. Bathing

days were subsequently divided up between the groups I, II and III so that no one went without the experience of luxury.

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One day a propaganda film was made about our model recreational home. About 30 youth with different health issues were staying there. In one of the wings was the boys department. The illnesses ranged from heart trouble, weak lungs, or a need to rest after an operation. The days passed by, filled with bathing, walks, rest, light treatments, and continual mealtimes.

Six weeks went by quickly, as did Christmas. We were spoiled rotten with presents, candy, and glittering Christmas trees.

I experienced a lot that year: Steinau, Schwarzenberg, a shorter stay in West Prussia with my father and brother, Frauenburg in Breslau, the gathering camp for all those who voluntarily wanted to stay in KLV, Lauban and the home in the mountains.

Would 1942 be filled with as diverse stays and experiences?

* * * *

Suddenly one day my roommate and I saw Heidi sitting at the desk by the window leaning on her arms and hands crying uncontrollably! Terrified, we, Karin and I, wondered what had caused this transformation of the otherwise always so self-restrained girl. Between sobs she said, “I’m getting adopted.” We stood there at a loss in this unusual situation, but Karin pulled herself together and said angrily, “You never talk about yourself even though Vera and I have spilled our guts out. You just kept quiet and looked sullen. Tell us about yourself so we can understand what’s going on.”

Heidi stopped sniffling and with a deep sigh she replied, “I’ll tell you. I just have my mother. Father took off in 1933, where I don’t know. He was a Communist, a mean man who I have never missed. He drank, fought, screamed, and was unpleasant. He always called me “ugly”, never by my name. Mother got stranger and stranger too. She started to drink and got sloppier and in the end didn’t care about anything. The Child Welfare Department came for visits, scolded her, and gave her a warning, which she took out on me by scolding and spanking me. I cleaned, tidied things up, cooked, to avoid getting punished, and the Child Welfare Department was more satisfied on their next visit. The only fun I had was at the HJ (Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth), translator’s note) evenings. The neighbourhood kids were mean and often yelled “ugly Communist kid” at me. Last year, when holidays started, I gave up. I couldn’t go on. I sat on the school

steps and cried. I didn't want to go home. My teacher saw me, contacted NSV (*Nationalsozialistische Volkswohofart* (National Socialist Welfare), translator's note), and I didn't have to go home. So I was sent around and interrogated, interrogated. I came to Frauenburg, you know, where we all met. My mother got picked up, but I don't know where." She paused and we interjected at the same time, "Are you a Communist?" She glared at us. "Does everything have to be about politics? Of course not! I never was. Our superintendent said to me that I would get a good life. I was good in school, clean, and orderly." We nodded in agreement. "But I'm so ugly!" And she certainly was. She had straggly brown hair in tightly combed braids, small brown eyes in a freckled face, plus a sullenness that emphasized her ugliness. But what a friend she was!

Heidi continued, "Imagine. A family from Zehlendorf is coming to meet me. Zehlendorf—where the rich people live! But they probably won't want me. They've lost their only son in Russia. The father is an officer who has been injured in the war. That's all I know and they'll be here any time now."

We quickly helped Heidi to rinse her tear-stained face and tie fresh bows in her braids. When she was called by our girl leader, Karin called after her, "Smile. Smile. You'll look cuter!" After a while of waiting our door opened and in came a uniformed officer on whose shoulders shone stripes and stars, and we understood that this was the man that Heidi had told us about. She herself came in with an elegantly dressed lady who protectively put her arm around her shoulders. Heidi, red, nervous, but yet happy.

After we had introduced ourselves the lady said, "We'll be away with your roommate for a few hours so that we can get to know each other. We'll be staying in Lauban for a few days before we leave and take Heidi with us."

Heidi came back in the evening, but was it really the same Heidi? She was a radiating, happy girl with her hair cut in a beautiful style, new clothes, and her arms full of presents—to us! We were of course very curious about how it all transpired. "Imagine that they said they were so lucky to get a girl like me in their lives. They said that!"

A few days later we waved good-bye to our roommate. She stood in the window of the train between a couple of happy adoptive parents. We had lost a good friend. But it would not be long until Karin and I would go home to our parents.

February Slush

One cold, wet, and grey February morning in 1942, our female leader knocked on our door and came hastily into our room with the news that Karin and I were to return home in a couple of days. Everyone who turned 14 during the first half of the year had to prepare for vocational training, work experience, etc. in their home towns.

Through the door I heard many shouts of joy, but I threw myself dejectedly onto my bed. I felt deserted and heavy-hearted. My friends talked gaily in the halls, but for me, all I heard echoing in my head with horror was my mother's statement when she visited me in the hospital after my intestinal operation: "Your father and I have decided that you are to start at the School of Commerce".

With the youthful view of time intervals, I took the decision calmly. It was a long time before I had to go there. But now the time had come! The School of Commerce. In my eyes it was a scary brick building that sent shivers up my spine when I passed by it on my way to or from the big sports ground. The School of Commerce. The tears started to run as I thought despairingly that I have to get out of this.

The water pitcher and hand bowl on the sturdy white steel stand had a sharp edge at the same height as the scar after my operation. Once I cut myself on that. Just think if I should do that again!

The next morning I hit my scar as hard as I could against the sharp edge so that the whole stand and everything on it tumbled to the floor. My venture really scared my roommates. I stood there lightly bleeding from my scar in the middle of the distress. The leaders were called in, the gentle doctor came, but he just put a band-aid on the sore with the words, "No reason to panic. It's just a scratch. Continue packing for your trip home." The camp leader, on the other hand, thought that I should rest for a few hours and eat my breakfast in bed.

I was deeply ashamed of myself. No one who had been so worried about my injury suspected that I had done it on purpose. That was an experience for life. Never again did I do such a thing.

As a passage in this section I would like to tell you about our camp doctor. He was a very pleasant middle-aged man who had a clinic in Lauban that was surrounded by a beautiful park. His employees were nuns, and his patients were treated with the greatest tenderness. Before my intestinal operation I stayed at that clinic for observation.

During the flu epidemics my friends were given isolated treatment there to prevent the flu from spreading to the whole KLV home. On the appropriate registration form we had to state our religious affiliation: EV (Evangelist, Protestant), K for Catholic, and Ggl for the new form of religious belief. Ggl is an abbreviation for "Gottgläubig", which is a belief in a higher power, but without Biblical texts and membership in a congregation. I personally belong to that faith.

The nuns' reaction was surprisingly positive, in contrast to what I had expected. Somehow I became their favourite, was treated like a young idealist who was to have the best care. To this day I look at nuns with admiration when I meet them. Friends who came under their care later on often said to me, "The nuns ask about you. You have really given our camp a good reputation with them". Still, I did no sort of brown-nosing with them, nor did I act in any way unnaturally. When I write these lines, I still wonder about what gave them that good impression.

* * * *

It was time to take farewell of my time with KLV, a time that for my part lasted for a year and a half. This organization exceeded everything that could be called good organization ability, but that is the way things were under Dr. Goebbels: things got done. Millions of children from the affected large cities escaped the Allies' terror bombings by being evacuated to different camps with teachers, leaders, and youth functionaries. Good support, care, and supervision, summer and winter adventures with games, walks, and relaxation. But also with weekdays of school or helping on the farms during the busy sowing and harvest times in the areas around the KLV homes.

Now we were to be repatriated to our parental homes with fathers and mothers who arbitrarily decided on career choices and future plans for their children without asking them. Listlessly I threw my belongings into my bags, which caused my HJ leader to remind me of my sloppiness. She repacked my things properly.

One last night, where Karin and I talked quietly while our new roommate slept blissfully. We talked about Heidi and fantasized about how things turned out for her, fantasized about our own futures and about Berlin. Berlin—still a spot of light in reluctant homesickness. I remember discreetly asking if we could meet up in the Swedish Church sometime. But there I ran into a dead end. "No,

not on your life. Grandma told me that it's a real Jewish haven with the new priest who hides a bunch of shady characters from the Gestapo, whose tender care they should end up under, as she put it." With the comprehension: "Karin is exaggerating again", but we are not going to fight on our last night. I fell asleep before the inevitable.

Our travel day came and towards dusk the train chugged towards and into a darkened Berlin. Father greeted me with the words, "Mother is at home with the flu". No "Welcome home", no tender words of endearment. In the distance I saw how Karin was hugged by her relatives with exclamations of joy. She disappeared with her family in the crowd towards the exit and we never met again. Father and I walked down the stairs to the subway and our train, which would take us to Steglitz and the bedridden Mother.

SS

I encountered the SS three times. Not in the way one would think after hearing all the propaganda against National Socialist Germany, that the SS was everywhere and made life miserable for the citizens. Quite the opposite. First, it was quite rare to meet them and second, the SS were absolutely not some kind of horrifying figures that were generally feared. On the contrary, they were seen as decent, helpful citizens. That is my experience. The reader can form his or her own opinion after reading my stories.

The Autumn Leaves

I had had enough! That bloody School of Commerce whose teachers gave me the most unfair grades. But I did not dare take these awful grades home and show my school-obsessed parents. I must get away! Away! I checked out what would be appropriate to take with me when I ran away. A big net bag would have to do. A blanket, warm clothes, food, toiletries, and my favourite book, *The Girl in the Soldier's Coat*, which was partly what inspired me to make my decision to be a soldier on the front line. If it was possible during the Napoleonic war, it should not be so impossible in the fall of 1942.

I biked off to the east, according to my compass. I neither cried nor felt afraid. I just felt an angry decisiveness as the wheels rolled along through the crunching autumn leaves that lined the streets of Berlin.

Hour after hour eastwards, and soon my journey took me through rural suburbs and the darkness began to fall, even darker in the compact blackout time. I slowed down and with a weak flashlight I tried to make my way to a suitable spot to spend the night. A soft rain had started to fall, so I had to hurry up and find a dry spot. I chose my sleeping spot under a thick pine in a hollow with grass, and with my raincoat on as protection I had it quite good and enjoyed the stillness, as I listened to the subsiding rain and fell asleep.

I was suddenly awoken by a clattering cooking pot and voices in the dawning light. Behind the pine I found a barbed wire fence. At first I could not understand the context, but I understood from the foreign voices that I had spent the night right beside a prison camp. Carefully and as quietly as possible, I packed up my things and led my bike carefully away from there before mounting my bike and riding away to the east.

* * * *

It turned out to be a beautiful sunny day. I was hungry, and looking for a good place to stop and eat made me bewildered. There was a fence on both sides of the road. Where was I going? The forest in the distance looked inviting and smelled good in the warm autumn sun. I found a big hole in the fence where I—fortunately or unfortunately—could crawl through with my bike, despite the trouble with the pedals and handlebars, which always wanted to get tangled up in the barbed wire, no matter how I tried to avoid it. I could have gotten badly tangled up in the wire. I had not thought of packing any band-

aids or a first-aid kit, but I got through in one piece, and after that sweaty task I could finally find a place to rest in the sun.

I sat down beside a creek and enjoyed my surroundings as my hunger subsided with a few pieces of bread and sausage. My surroundings seemed to me to be a little too well-kept for undisturbed nature. The creek was well-shaped and the trees and the bushes reminded me more of a park than a wild forest. The ditches and embankments seemed to be planned. I thought about this unusual environment but did not reflect any deeper about it, and somehow I started to regret that I ran away. What is going to happen? What is going to happen now? My lunchbox will soon be empty. And how will I, a 15-year-old girl, become a soldier? I am probably quite crazy anyway, but what is done is done, and it is getting more and more ignominious to come "crawling" back home and meeting not only spankings but also laughter and scorn. Given that my current surroundings seemed so interesting, I decided to go exploring. But first I would wash up in the creek and comb my long hair.

The creek was shallow and I could easily jump over to the other side where the water looked clearer. I quickly planted my one foot down in the middle of the creek to get ready to jump... and sank! Quicksand, my one leg was stuck, inexorably stuck! I desperately tried to get a hold of my bike which was lying on the bank, when I heard a lofty voice talk to me, "What is this girl doing here?" I looked up and saw a tall man in full soldier's equipment with the shiny tag that glimmered blindingly in the sunshine. A pair of strong arms helped me out of that precarious situation and I found myself suddenly with soldiers who looked at my piteous figure with surprise.

The feeling of wretchedness in this situation gave me tears of anger, but humbleness also radiates courage. "I want to be a soldier—and then it turned out this way", hick-upped my voice while I was led to a security building with an office. In the office there were several men with shining SS badges on their uniform coats. One Scharführer (squad leader, translator's note) ordered a warm drink for me, and over a steaming cup of hot chocolate I had to tell them about my trespassing on the practice field and why I ended up in the SS barracks area. An order was given to mend the fence. To my story he made the laconic comment: "A girl like you should not be beaten, but

what to do to avoid mixing in people and paperwork?" He got up and disappeared for a few minutes. A couple of the other men talked calmly with me and tried to get me to forget my wretched situation. Young, handsome soldiers that did not leave me unaffected and who made me angry in my wet, dirty clothes.

The Scharführer came back looking happy and relieved. "We will drive you, bike, and baggage to the intersection of Markelstraße. From there you will continue on home. We would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about your stay here. Just tell your parents about a normal running away from home that you regret. Your shame is something you'll have to live with, but we'll do what we can to discreetly get your father to stop hitting you. It shouldn't be hard to do, given that your father is a member of the SA. Your parents have probably reported you missing to the federal police, in which case you will tell even them about a normal running away from home. We trust you." And with a certain lightening in his look he continued, "because a soldier has to be able to keep quiet, right?" I nodded and was driven in the back of a truck, together with my bike and bags, to Berlin and Markelstraße.

On our way one of the young SS men snuck a paper into my hand with his name and field post number. "Write, write and tell me" he whispered in my ear. Herman Hacke and field post number. At the intersection of Scholstraße and Markelstraße the small military truck came to a stop and I continued on alone. With both dread and the feeling of being abandoned somehow, I approached my home, but my "secret" gave me some sort of comfort and strength, which I was a little proud of.

I met my upset mother at the door. I had to get washed up and change my stiffly dried clothes to "good clothes" to go to the police for an interrogation. The police station was a little ways away from our place. I told them about a normal, regretful running away from home and they were not the least bit troublesome. It was, after all, just for a day. My prank was not reported to the school or the Hitler Youth centre, it was kept within the family. Father was of course outraged, but his obligatory spanking with the bamboo cane, which he always took down from the bookcase behind the clock, did not happen. Spanking never happened again, but after his thorough scolding, he did not say a word to me until the Christmas of 1942/43. His spankings must have immediately stopped because he was

contacted by someone after this episode, and it must have been a person or people he highly respected.

This was one of my confrontations with the SS. The story could have ended here, but it had a sequel, a romantic one. The field post number. Herman Hacke gave me many moments of support and hope, but I did not dare get his letters sent to my home. Instead I exchanged letters under general delivery in another name—Sigrid Lampion—and it had a catch to it: I could not pick up the letters myself, I had to get someone who was older than me to do it.

The Big Dipper

The field post number and Herman Hacke gave me many moments of comfort. As I said, I did not dare get his letters sent to my home address, so our exchange of letters was done under general delivery. My letters were picked up by a neighbour's girl who was in on it all. Our letter-writing gave a worthwhile exchange of ideas, hopes, both personal and political, and went on for a few months. But a secret never stays that way forever when a third person is involved. The neighbour's girl, Inge Selle, met a few of my classmates during a preparatory job on our school holiday and told them about it. Their mothers knew my mother and my letters disappeared from their hiding place under the sturdy wardrobe. I was both sad and lonely again. My letters went "unanswered" until one letter reached me anyway through Inge Selle—the last one. Herman wanted to meet me at the Feuerbach subway station, which still goes by that name, just like the subway.

It was one of those early spring evenings at the beginning of March when the weather can still turn cold. I told my parents I was going out for an extra job with the Hitler Youth and with that white lie I could go to my first date, a little shaky with hope. Like a normal teenager I wanted to wear a little more attractive clothes than the HJ uniform on my first secret date, but the circumstances did not allow that. Herman met me at the station dressed in the familiar black uniform and held his peaked cap under his arm. He looked at me seriously and said, "Our meeting will be short. I'm not allowed to exchange letters with you without your parents' permission until you turn 16. As for me, I'm leaving for a mission far away that I'm not allowed to talk about. You are young and sweetly innocent." He put his pointer finger under my chin and gave me a gentle kiss on the lips. As if he had done something improper, he quickly put his hat on his head and disappeared down the steps towards the platform. Before he disappeared, he turned around and made a friendly gesture that changed into a correct Hitler greeting.

In a daze, I went home on darkened streets that were hardly lit up by the stars. I pressed my fingers to my lips. I did not know if I should be happy or sad. I had a strange feeling where I was walking. I remember the Big Dipper well with its seven twinkling stars. The facades of the houses were still in one piece and some of the beautiful ornaments were so typical for the turn of the century

architecture. Only a few weeks later would many of them gape empty with burned out stinking holes or lay in a pile of ruins. The stars would then no longer be mirrored in the blacked out apartment windows. The terror bombings would begin and even our street would be affected.

And the Wall Cracked...

One evening at the end of March when the victory-certain winds howled through the ridges of the roofs in Berlin, I followed the starlight with my eyes through the windows, the weather vane, like praying angels, turning to the east and the west and the east around the edges of the chimney. The radio was on loudly in the living room where my parents sat listening. My brother slept soundly on the other side in our common room. A small sliver of light from the living room came through the door and lit up my portrait of the Führer that hung over my bed. With its Rembrandt colours it made a golden impression with his blue eyes looking out over the room.

Because there was a blackout, I had to be careful not to allow too much light from the living room into my room when I rolled up the blinds to see over the roof tops. We lived on the top floor, the fourth floor.

I was just about to fall asleep when my father with an angry exclamation turned off the radio as an off-key soprano drowned out the orchestra—or so he thought! Just after the apparatus was turned off there was a deafening explosion that shook our building so that the wall over my bed cracked diagonally from the floor to the ceiling. The portrait of the Führer rocked and in my childish belief I was convinced that it was his portrait that held the wall together so it did not crumble over me and my bed. It was that picture that I had wanted and gotten for my birthday.

I quickly jumped into my carefully laid-out clothes while my mother helped my brother put his on. At the same time the doorbell rang and our neighbours asked if we had not heard the sirens. My father could do nothing but laugh. The supposed off-key singer had gotten her song mixed up with the sirens. The mistake was not that strange since we were used to a radio voice always interrupting our program and informing us of the enemy approach. That did not happen this time and we were literally caught napping.

* * * *

We hurried down to the bomb shelter to the accompaniment of anti-aircraft fire, droning airplanes, and exploding bombs. Our apartment building miraculously made it through the whole war, with the exception of a later stage when our floor was hit by firebombs that were quickly extinguished.

As soon as things had calmed down to a certain degree, Father went out to patrol the neighbourhood, which was his duty as security guard. He usually came back after awhile and took me up to the roof, which is something I appreciated because I always got pain in my legs from being in the bomb shelter, where we could be for many hours. But this time an out-of-breath father came directly with the order of a hand count because the neighbouring building was in flames.

The risk was immediately understood that our building could catch fire, as the sparks blew heavily over the ridge of our roof. We made a chain of pails of water that were filled in the apartments. It worked well after all our practice, but the water pressure fell floor by floor and soon we were down to the bottom floor. Luckily the wind turned and we could get up to the roof to behold the damage.

The security guards had worked feverishly with the water-pouring and the clay shingles made a hissing sound when the water came in contact with them. The neighbouring building, with its burning flames in the apartments, looked like a lit up set piece where the windows rattled with ghostly sounds from the heat pressure. Occasionally a few big sparks flew over us and one of my braids that stuck out from underneath the hood of my wind-proof jacket hissed. The smell of burnt hair caught my attention and I quickly smothered the glowing particles with my gloves. Unprepared, we heard a droning sound, a little higher-pitched than the sound from the bombers that we feared. We were not especially worried, perhaps it was one of our scouting planes or one of our own fighter planes, when a whistling, clattering noise started to howl around us. We threw ourselves behind a chimney and with hate and angry shouts we shook our fists at the English marauder that rained machine gun fire over the people who were trying to dowse the flames. But still I had to turn my attention to myself. I had been hit by a ricocheting piece of clay shingle during the attack and had been lightly wounded. I shouted more with anger: “Bloody swine! The humane Englishmen, ugh!” I heatedly wished that I could shoot down the marauder, but this event—big enough then—was still just a teaser for what was to come. The terror bombing of Dresden in February, 1945 was just one of many such bombings. I at least got an insight into what kind of enemy we were dealing with.

* * * *

After having my wound dressed and sleeping for a few hours, I went over to the neighbouring apartment building to help out with the evacuation there. Every so often the fire flared up again in the blackened stocks and the lumber that got a little more food in the water-drenched, stinking atmosphere of burned cloth.

At the gate to our yard I found an old woman crying, though one was not used to Berlin's women shedding tears during or after a bombing, but with resolute expressions and a certain degree of dark humour they supported each other and those around them and kept their panic in check. This is a common character trait for them. Panic is, as you know, a bigger danger than the attacks themselves, for it can always be mastered and conquered. I have a hard time comforting people, but I was moved by this woman's tears when she, in the midst of all this mess and frantic work in the smoke, stink, and destruction, pathetically complained about her fine china that she could not save. It was on the third floor in a china cabinet in the kitchen, or what was once a kitchen, but was, according to the security guards, unreachable because of the risk of collapse. I looked up the stairs. The first two flights were pretty much undamaged, but the third one, where the railing was burnt off, looked like a burned-up barn ladder. The stairs by the wall looked to me to be usable and I lifted the laundry basket full of towels I had with me and decisively went to rescue the woman's dear possessions, despite the woman's protests. Brave? More like rash self-assertion to conquer cowardice. Quite common in teenagers.

I was surprised by the uneven destruction. Some of the apartments were intact, like someone had just cleaned them, while others were totally demolished. The sky shone through the roofless beams and I could easily find the undamaged cabinet. It stood there, saturated with water, but shining white and totally intact. With eager hands I packed the wonderful, beautiful porcelain in the basket, very much aware that a broken piece would be of no use. The lightly elegant pieces with rococo ornaments, plates, bowls that for a few seconds gave me the sensation of Mozart melodies and the 18th century, were really beautiful. But I was quickly brought back to 1943 when some of the smoking beams above the cabinet warned that they were starting to break. I kept on filling the basket, as much as I could carry. When in danger and with self-persuaded decisiveness one gets

unbelievable strength that is said to be caused by rising adrenalin, and I lifted the basket and started down the stairs.

Upset voices were heard from below and a crack behind me told me that the rest of the kitchen collapsed from the power of the overthrown glowing beams. But with shaky knees and a resolute will I continued down the stairs where worried SA men reached out to grab me and liberate me from my burden while tenderly telling me about my rashness. The woman was very grateful for being reunited with her precious belongings from her china cabinet.

After this escapade I went to a friend on the neighbouring street for a calming talk. Ilse Salm and her family came from Koblenz, a city in the Rheinland. At the time they did not have the Berlin heartiness. They loudly complained in a passive way that made me feel down. The house they lived in was newly built from the later part of the 1930s. It was airy, light, and modern. From their kitchen window I had a good view of the lower part of my street and I could see my mother carrying household paraphernalia. She was a little taller than the Berlin women, slender, and had an aristocratic bearing about her. I saw my former principal from elementary school come riding to see if any of his students had been bombed.

Out came my father, carrying a sewing machine, when suddenly a figure of a woman came loose from the turn-of-the-century facade and covered him in a cloud of plaster. Worried, encouraging people broke out in hearty laughter when Father, unharmed and still carrying the sewing machine, dusted himself off and laconically said, “I have always wanted to be attacked by naked women, but this doesn’t feel very good at all”.

I left the complaining Koblenzers and went back to the active Berliners. After awhile Ilse came to help us. When our arms were too tired to work more she suggested that we take a look at the destruction in the area and I do not regret that I went along with her suggestion because it gave me an experience well above all the events of the day.

The area around Breitenbach Square, a modern center situated between Friedenau and Steglitz, was totally destroyed. High-explosive bombs that had cracked my wall had turned this residential area into a pile of ruins. The people there were carrying clay bricks after bricks to free the bomb shelters from the weight and to get the people out. There were several men there in well-pressed

neighbourhood uniforms who were contemptuously called “uniform keepers” by the SA. These “uniform keepers” did not have much of an idea about the ideology but they gladly paraded around in their grand uniforms, directed and gave orders conceitedly and totally unnecessarily to the intensively working civilians. Suddenly and unexpectedly a car caravan came quickly to the place where Ilse and I were standing. It stopped, and out of one of the cars came a little man in overalls and joined the intensively working citizens... And now the “neighbourhood men” would get going because the man in overalls was none other than the national minister Dr. Goebbels! It is easy to recognize his comforting voice with its beautiful sound. He made it a habit to travel from place to place where the terror bombings in Berlin had taken place and was, in that way, an inspiration to new efforts. He was a noticeable moral support who also made an impression on me and Ilse.

* * * *

The bomb shelters were opened and the relieved people staggered out into the open, except for in one place where tens of people died of a gas leak.

When I got home, Mother asked me to go to my maternal grandparents, and of course to my paternal grandparents, to let them know about the situation. Half way there I met up with Aunt Hedvig, my father’s aunt and my paternal grandfather’s housekeeper, who was sent off on the same errand regarding our situation.

Calm, but quite tired after the exciting day, I fell asleep that evening with the knowledge that no one in our family or their homes were hurt or damaged, something that not all Berliners were granted.

The portrait of Adolf Hitler that Vera, in her excitement, believed held the wall together.

The Flying Dutchman

The auditorium on the top floor of the brick building of the School of Commerce was full of students with high expectations. Despite the intensive bombings, this building, to my regret, was left unharmed. Awards were to be given to the good students. These were called diligence awards. I did not expect any. Instead, I stood there totally uninterested amongst my classmates and my thoughts revolved around completely different things, as usual, than this bloody school.

After all the endless award-giving, the ceremonies came to an end with the giving out of the thank-you presents from the state to those who had contributed with diverse efforts in different campaigns. I did not hope for anything here either, even if I enthusiastically took part in the different collection campaigns. Many others like me thought it was a hundred times more stimulating to go around with the stick wagon from house to house, from building to building, and see the wagon be filled with all sorts of "junk", than the monotonous cramming studying at school.

The wagon was filled with copper items, iron waste, optical products, rubber, and other things that were important to the war industry, and our youthful enthusiasm could do nothing more than rub off on the givers in the total mustering of strength.

Vera Schimanski was called out. A nudge from a classmate got me to wake up and amazed I made my way up the aisle to the podium. An envelope containing a box seat ticket to the Volksopera and Richard Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman" was handed over to me. Blushing and dazed with joy, I rejoined my class.

* * * *

That opera is one that I have always loved, even to this very day. There is nothing as wonderfully powerfully masculine in the honour of music as the steersman's choir and nothing as sweetly feminine as the spinning song. The overture pours out in foaming stormy sea waves with calmer breezes in between. One gets captured and taken in a grip of esthetic beauty in this existence of struggle, work, and faithful love. That is just the kind of artistic experience that should be conveyed in all art!

* * * *

I was dressed in a shiny light blue taffeta gown that I had gotten from my cousins whose father owned a fine jewelry store in Kurfürstendamm. My mother's sister had passed away from kidney

disease at a young age and left behind two girls hardly in school-age, whose solvent relatives in Sweden amongst other places showered them, with the best of intentions, with all sorts of presents.

These, my spoiled cousins, were quite injured during the Russian Bolshevik's conquest of Berlin in 1945. But now it was 1943 and the presents from their well-filled closets with quality-wise new clothes were a real gift. Thanks to them I never felt that I had a lack of clothes during the war and I was even one of the best-dressed students in my class at the School of Commerce. Consequently well-dressed, I enjoyed Wagner's work in my box and felt like a chosen one.

The tasteful set pieces, which are always a characteristic of National Socialism's guidelines, in the undamaged opera house gave a feeling of unbelievable beauty.

I went home. A long, long walk through the streets where many of the blocks stared blankly, scorched and burned, in the moonlight. Whole facades with completely collapsed roofs. Empty and deserted, black and burnt-smelling blocks as monuments of the enemy's hatred and malevolence. The main street in Steglitz, which used to be full of traffic, still had a yellow street car or two with nearly extinguished lanterns on them. They made their familiar sound on the otherwise silent business stretch, where still-functioning cinemas were cramped between nailed up display windows and boarded up store windows.

The facades at Titania Palace were decorated with pictures of Zarah Leander, Kristina Söderbaum, Willy Birgel, Heinz Rühman, and whatever other movie stars there were. Titania Palace, a giant cinema with a huge organ, was government-owned by UFA, Universum Film AG, while the smaller cinemas in the area were privately owned. There was therefore always lots of movies in this environment of government dominance and private initiative. Amongst these movies were those of Greta Garbo and the much-loved-by-children Shirley Temple.

During the war many farces and cartoons were shown. It was always relaxing and an escape from reality to sneak into a movie theatre, away from the daily problems of school and the stress of war. Afterwards it was common to visit a café for a cup of hot chocolate and a cookie. A day like that felt like a success. But this late evening I just wanted to gradate the music in me, get some distance to the

drama at the opera I had just experienced, and the meeting with the home on Markelstraße. It turned out to be a farewell walk through Berlin, for soon after, the Allies started their terror bombing that would lay Berlin in total destruction.

Clear Water in the Baltic Sea

This memorandum section is perhaps totally uninteresting from a political point of view, but nonetheless favourable for reflection.

Swedish worries that Poland pollutes the Baltic Sea often come up in discussions. Not that long ago there was a TV program that showed the horrible destruction of the coast at the old Swedish occupation at Wollin, where we could see how the pipelines from the city of Stettin empty straight into the sea without any filtering whatsoever. Feces floated around along with other disgusting things. I do not often cry with anger and resentment in our so chastened existence, but when I saw this and remembered that once clear, sparkling water with its wonderful coast and nice sandy beaches, I felt an inner hate towards the Polish thieves, and it took a fair bit of self-control not to scream a curse at the reporter, who was artificially trying to wrap his tongue around all the Polish names.

With an artificial solidarity and infernal stubbornness, the mass media pronounced the former German cities in the thieves' language, which seemed almost ridiculous since Polish never sits well on Swedish tongues. The powers of the victors were quick to incorporate German territories without reminders of the regime and the people who fled from the beautiful, fertile Pomerania.

July, 1943

The boat foamed up the water with its propeller and rudder by the stern and was on its way with German tourists to the island of Wollin. Wollin was surrounded by several known and well-liked beaches in its sea scenery, free from the noise and crowds of the cities. We were on our way to Heidebrink where we were going to stay in a little cabin with self-catering. Complete harmony shone around the four of us in our family, Mother, Father, my little brother, and me. Perhaps we sensed the definite split that was on its way after our holiday, given the situation with the war, and therefore all differences were to be put aside for the duration of our holiday. It was in no way destined, but more the case of fate wanting to give our family one last happy but short time together.

As if there was an unspoken agreement, we all treated our togetherness with great care these few weeks. When I was older, I wondered why a marriage was not always treated with consideration and why the happy moments were not captured, given that they could at any time be brutally broken by acts of folly, vanity, and

misunderstandings. And in the worst case, death. As a parent it is unnecessary to create an unhappy atmosphere by egoistic self-interest and opinions that one forces onto one's offspring.

* * * *

This little fishing cabin was situated on a hill surrounded by a pine forest. It had a few small rooms and a small veranda plus a tiny kitchen with a wood-burning stove. Yes, everything was small, but comfortable. The work to gather wood for the stove was not the easiest since many other tourists were out on the same errand: gathering wood for coffee. A pine forest does not leave much after it and we were only allowed to pick fallen branches!

The sea with its wonderful sandy beach invited us to many nice swims. Father made a bow from an old umbrella. He tied the metal rods together to make a strong bow, and put together a few arrows with cork tips to both protect sensitive targets but also so they would float on the waves when they ended up in the water.

Forgotten was corporal punishment for school and homework. Now we just enjoyed ourselves. For Mother it was a relief not to have to think about running a home. She just had to bake a cake every now and then if she felt like it because we ate all our meals at the different restaurants in the area. Forgotten were the ruins of Berlin and the worrisome nights with the bombings.

I, who so often travelled to Sweden for the summer when I was on holidays from school, was happy to be able to experience a German summer together with my family. Life felt so far away from the war, so it surprises me to this very day that the regime was in this way able to organize such peaceful lives for the working people in affected cities during the nightly terror bombings.

Everything was free from politics. It did not exist. Just families, sun, and the roar of the sea. My mother, who occasionally visited the shops, could enjoy listening to the dialect of the locals. Few tourists could understand this Swedish-German. That is what we called this local language and we understood it well. There were clearly Swedish expressions like ”köpen”, ”gåen”, ”stängen”, ”soven”, and so on. Swedish words with the ending –en on the end.

As young people do, I soon got to know a girl of my age who was from the town. She had a whole bundle with 25 cent novels that I secretly borrowed. My parents would of course not know about this as it would certainly be seen as harmful to “absorb the romantic

nonsense". I hid these novels under my mattress and read them when I thought I was alone.

But one day my father surprised me by looking into my room while I was reading. Fear of getting punished came over me, but he just calmly asked "What are you reading?", and with a glance at the pamphlet he said with an amused look, "Don't let your mother see you reading that stuff" and stroked my hair and left. I stared dumbfounded. "Good Lord, why isn't he always like that?"

* * * *

The weeks went by all too quickly and the trip home to Berlin was done in the sign of good-bye. We knew that the evacuation was coming. Berlin was to be emptied of as many civilians as possible. On the train home, Father told me that my future was now in my own hands.

The first days in Berlin entailed a good-bye visit to my maternal grandparents, who had decided to return to Sweden. Their Swedish passports with the three crowns on the cover lay on the dining room table. Packed bags and my grandparents' travel fever made me a little foreign with them. "When we've won, you're coming back of course" were my last words. Grandpa nodded, but Grandma started to cry and said, "The poor little naïve girl", whatever she meant with that.

My paternal grandparents across the street were also in the process of leaving. Their destination was eastwards to Gnesen in the liberated corridor, where they had their relatives. Everything was in break-up mode, even at our place.

A Definite Farewell to Family Life

Even us others, Mother, brother, and I, now left Berlin. The train chugged away. A long journey eastward to East Prussia was our goal. It was still summer and the landscape displayed itself in the fairest of colours. We passed by fields that had recently been harvested, through Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, Pommerania, West Prussia, and our destination station East Prussia, which is the province where my paternal grandmother was born. All these places showed themselves with sunshine and warmth. They reminded me a lot of the Swedish landscape.

I do not remember much about East Prussia during those two weeks during which we stayed with a school teacher who was also a bee keeper. His passion for sitting in the garden at mealtime made these into a nightmare for me. The bees were everywhere and I got stung many a time. But our stay there was, as I said, short because Friede Keller in Kruschdorf by Bromberg invited us to rent half of her house.

We of course took her up on her offer, for there we could live more like a family and we were closer to Berlin, to which Mother returned every so often to pick up household items. I went with her once. While working on this book I found a letter amongst my archived things that I had written to my maternal grandparents during one such visit to Berlin. I got the letter back as inherited goods from my maternal grandparents. I quote: "This week in Whitsun (May, 1944) I went with Mother to Berlin."

When I saw Berlin again I felt a powerless rage. These bloody English and American marauders! Residential area after residential area were their targets. Not even hospitals were spared their bombings. I wondered why we did not do the same to the enemies' cities. We Germans are way too respectable. Fight terror with terror, because respectability is nothing that will bring about the fall of the English and Americans.

Some of the National Socialist honesty and respectfulness can be seen on an envelope I have saved. It was clearly stated that our letters were opened. No "democratic secrecy" here, which is the SÄPO[1] method à la Sweden, that about a year or two ago made the mistake of forgetting to put back a checked page of a letter to my husband. But that is another story.

[1] SÄPO, Säkerhetspolisen, is the secret police of Sweden.

Late summer, 1943. Departure fot East Prussia. In the window of the door to the train, in the back row, one can see from the left Vera, Folke, and their mother Greta Shimanski.

Easter Lilies

In Germany, Christmas is a little calmer than the extravagance of the Christmas holiday in Sweden. On the other hand, Easter is a much bigger holiday. Germans look forward to Easter like Swedes look forward to Christmas. In Germany, Easter is called Ostern. At Ostern the Germanic goddess Ostara comes and drives away the winter. On Easter morning presents are hidden and Easter eggs are filled with candy that the "Easter bunny" has come with.

In the apartment buildings in the city one looked for these treats behind bookcases and cabinets, while out in the country one looked for these in the garden. Older siblings found the most imaginative hiding places and parents hid gifts to one another. Easter eggs were painted (during the war one gladly took the brittle shells and filled them with flowers to decorate the Easter table). In schools, before Easter break, drawings and paintings were made with Easter motifs.

On visitor's day, Easter Monday, we visited our maternal and paternal grandparents, where we were always treated to chocolate bunnies or "nests" with all sorts of candy in them. We surprised them with bouquets of Easter lilies and tulips.

* * * *

In 1943, when our family split up, we, through the Hitler Youth, visited various hospitals to cheer up the injured soldiers. We handed over colourful eggs and flowers, and performed shorter skits and sang.

A young Waffen SS candidate who injured his foot during a training exercise, which I did not see as particularly heroic, started to talk to me and we became acquaintances.

Hans was a young man of 19 with an exuberant personality and who was a little too bold. During a visit to Bromberg, which is where the hospital was, he climbed down the drainpipe from his window when he saw me outside on the road. His hospital clothes and his bad leg did not prevent him from limping with me to the station. He was the total opposite of the general perception one has of a disciplined German soldier. He was lively and mischievous, but he must have won over his superiors, given that he always got away with his misbehaviour.

One fine morning on the farm when my mother, brother, and I sat at the breakfast table, the warped kitchen door was thrown open and my friend Ilse came in, out of breath, and shouted, "Vera, you have

to come and help us right away in the yard". At the same time she winked with a hinting smile. I suspected right away what it was about: Hans! He was here! In the distance behind the pine woods one could hear the soldiers training, shooting, and explosions.

Mother did not understand a thing, which was just as well, because her prudishness would surely have stopped me if there was the least little suspicion that there was some sort of interest in me from the opposite sex.

Ilse and I rushed off to the open field where a giant stone dominated in the middle of the sunshine. "Where is he?" I panted while I caught my breath by the boulder. "Who?" teased Ilse, "I said that we need help in the field." "You tricked me, I thought it was Hans. You know how much I like him."

"That's what I wanted to hear", a male voice piped up from behind the rock and a fully-armed soldier turned out to be Hans! A big hug, a joyful exclamation: "We're going to the front, but I'll write." And with that thump from his helmet, weapon, and equipment, I watched as he ran back across the field.

"He's crazy", said Ilse, "running away from an exercise like that. Don't fall in love with him because that type dies quickly". My friend predicted correctly. We exchanged a bunch of letters, but the last one came back to me in the NSV school in the summer of 1944. It had been stamped "Died for Great Germany". Pathetically, I burned the letters I had received from him in the school's furnace room, including the photo of the happy 19-year-old soldier. My friends wondered under protest why I had acted this way, but I wanted to go on without any memories.

* * * *

I mentioned my prudish mother with her Victorian values. My father turned out to be different. He was stationed outside of Dresden where Siemens had moved to, to avoid the bombings of Berlin, where it had become impossible for the engineers to work at their drawing tables. One of his visits to the family in Kruschdorf coincided with a happy episode. Visiting the family was a well-meaning order from the state and even I was free from the NSV school in Thorn. I was just about to take a bite of my sandwich with "Harzer Käse", a strong-smelling cheese, when Father came in and hastily snatched the sandwich out of my hand with the words, "Don't eat that now. A few nice young men from the work service are waiting outside. They would gladly like to meet the girls here in the

village. I told them that my beautiful daughter would surely know a few".

Mother protested wildly, but Father dismissed her by saying, "They are properly educated young men and the girl is 16 years old. Don't be so—old-fashioned". While they were talking, I fixed myself up and went out to the group of happy boys, and together we looked for Ilse and her sisters and many others.

The summer evening was lovely and singing merrily we walked through the village, two by two, but still together. Everything was so proper, lovely, and innocent, but was still, or because of that, so very much fun.

We looked for the mystical park, a forgotten relic that, according to my parents, was once owned by my forefathers. Old fruit trees, mossy statues, and a small lake in the middle, it must have been made by well-off estate owners, but now the dwelling-house served as a working camp. I would like to see that park again. Is it still there? Is there anything left at all of that little German village with its fertile soil that gave the good harvests to the industrious growers?

I myself had a little garden where seeds were sown and germinated, and the lush plants came up without the use of any fertilizer whatsoever. I admired the Swedish farmers who put in so much effort and harboured so many worries about how much their soil would yield while their West Prussian counterparts had a soil that just gave and gave, but later nothing was good enough for the Polish thieves. Explain that one.

Even this experience gave rise to an exchange of letters and nothing more. But what do today's youth get out of life when everything is taken from them in advance and nothing is forbidden? They do not experience that time of innocence when shyness and respectability are a source of happiness on the way to a race-conscious and idealistic lifestyle like National Socialism wanted to shape it. Not the Victorian fright and sexual fear and not today's licentiousness and immorality, but a conscious, responsible, and sound development with taboos around all degeneracy and immoral life. I am grateful that I got to experience the Third Reich, if just for a short time, during my younger years.

Injured soldiers are honoured.

We Could Finally Smell the Maybells

The second episode during which I was in touch with the SS was in the spring of 1944, but it started back in the fall of 1943.

I had been lured by brochures from a newly-founded organization called *Landdienst* (Rural Service). I am sure the idea was brilliant and good, but what people do with their good ideas is decisive. Landdienst was organized through the Hitler Youth and was to educate pioneers, in other words future farmers, males and females. That such a goal did not just turn out to be too trying for a city girl like me was not the only thing I experienced. In addition, the training program I went to in West Prussia had mostly German-Baltic girls in it, who had indeed gone through a whole lot of hardships, but who proved to be totally foreign to the spirit of comradeship like the NS ideology and the idea of community. There I was, a girl from Berlin, used to the Hitler Youth and its joyful life norms, who ended up in something completely different from what the light descriptions in the brochures had lulled me into, for the purpose of becoming a farmer.

The school was situated on a slope, like a peaceful little estate, and the leader was a farmer girl from Danzig. About 15 girls greeted me on the evening of my arrival and they were somewhat reserved, which always feels trying for the new arrival.

At the start I had a work-experience position with a small farmer close to the school and found my place in an otherwise foreign world. Clean turnips, harvest potatoes, learn to harness a horse and tie it to the wagon, as well as learning to drive one. From the beginning I felt at home in the school, but I could not avoid feeling a certain bullying against me, which before was totally foreign to me. The Berlin girl was obviously to be humbled and the Baltic girls became a curse I preferred to avoid.

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After awhile I got to continue my work-experience with a farmer whose large farm and property were located quite far from the school. The several kilometer long road to and from the school was full of hardships, especially in the winter. The work was hard with doing the laundry in the creek that ran just beside the farm, winter storage of carrots that were to be covered by big piles of straw to protect them from the frost, milking a whole bunch of cows by hand, and after such a hard work-day I had to walk the long road back to

the school, where I was often met by having to empty the latrines under the ridicule and scorn of the Baltic girls.

I got stomach cramps and vomited, which resulted in a friendly doctor advising me decisively to quit. Neither my condition nor my personality were suitable to this kind of life. After the Christmas celebrations I did not go back to Landdienst, but what I had learned there came in quite handy to some neighbours during the winter months in Kruschdorf, where my mother and brother had been evacuated to from Berlin. I felt really proud of myself when, during a boil epidemic that ran rampant through the village, I could jump in and drive a horse and wagon to run errands in Bromberg, about 20 km from the village. The epidemic struck every so often in an unexplainable fashion and the suspicion of the Polish opposition's deliberate contamination arose but could neither be proven nor dismissed.

My failure at Landdienst had lowered my mood to zero and my surroundings in West Prussia were in many ways purely psychologically joy-killing. If the Hitler Youth had not activated me, my life in that village would have bored me to tears. As a Swedish descendant I was chosen to recruit some German-speaking Polish girls to the youth movement. I succeeded better than expected, but I had to realize that the intolerance of the West Prussian Germans was much too hard to break. After the Polish violence against the German citizens in the fall of 1939, when so many lost their loved ones, feelings of revenge lived on in many of them. But I with my Swedish heritage wanted to break this trend of hundreds of years of hatred on both sides. Or the conviction: We National Socialists will show that we are better. But I met with a massive resistance, and after a fierce confrontation with one of the high-up leaders of Bromberg, I got bloody well furious. This is what happened: One of the early beautiful spring days in 1944 we drove our wagons full of many youths in a caravan to a larger town where we had a meeting for a big HJ manifestation. "My" Polish girls asked me insistently to be allowed to wear a scarf just like the German girls so they did not feel marked out as being second-class citizens. I did not think it would matter and approved of it. So we drove with merriment and song to the meeting place. Upon our arrival, I was immediately ordered to see the Ringführer (a high rank amongst the HJ) and got a good telling-off for allowing scarves to be worn by non-fully-affiliated

German citizens. Through the window I could see how another leader harshly gathered in the scarves from the humiliated and sad girls. I was so angry! I tore off my scarf and roared, "I am Swedish, take my scarf too!" and left the room. There were no happy girls who turned around and drove home, and my time as leader in the HJ was short.

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With unbroken conviction of National Socialism's ideology, a conviction that was not crushed by careerists of the above type, I was so bold as to contact a high SS leader who I knew was on leave at that time and was visiting his family in the neighbouring village. The family was happy about the arrival of their new-born child. Their first child was a girl who was already a teenager.

It turned out that the house was surrounded by a beautiful garden where smiling Polish girls took care of the paths. A stylish woman in her lower middle-age called out to her husband on my behalf. He came and turned out to be a nice confidence-inspiring person who I could easily confide in about all my troubles: my problem with the schools, HJ in Bromberg, and my being lost when it came to education and my future goals. He found exactly what I needed: the elite school within the NSV. A National Socialist school in the social sector that partly stood under the protection of the SS. He gave me hope and asked me to fill in an application form at the Gestapo in Bromberg right away. He advised me though not to be too spiteful towards the undiplomatic Ringführer in Bromberg. She had lost both her father and siblings during the blood-red days in August-September, 1939. But my attitude to break the vicious circle in West Prussia was right, according to him.

My third meeting with the SS was thus the next day. I visited their office in Bromberg. It was really unpretentious. It was not at all like the flashy offices with portraits of Hitler, shining giant hawks with golden swastikas in their talons or the extravagance of swastika banners that one sees in the movies. A sign with the word "Gestapo" on a house along the street. A security guard post outside where my papers were checked. Then I went up a few steps and entered a simply-furnished room quite similar to a contemporary post-office or police station. Upon my inquiry I was given a few forms to fill in. It is common that the surname is written first, but I wrote my habitual first name Vera, but had just written the V when I discovered that my last name was to be written first. That is actually

the only thing I remember from all the questions. The following comments came from the examiner: “That von, we’ll cross that out. It’s a snobbish title that you should forget within the community and upon acceptance into the school”. I told them about my mistake with the V, that it stood for Vera and nothing else. With a happy “Heil Hitler!” I left the office and went with light steps to the station. At Bromberg’s station I ate my obligatory coupon-free vegetable soup before a real chug-chug train took me back to Kruschdorf.

Just a few weeks later I got a welcome letter from the NSV school in Thorn with a ticket and schedule. A lucky meeting that forever secured my National Socialist conviction.

A happy Vera on the beach, 1943.

Gladiolus

The name Thorn was printed in capital letters above the train station, like all the other stations around the world in the 1940s. A soldier helped me out of the train car with my heavy suitcase, and with a sort of timid curiosity I now stood on the platform, prepared to start a new "career". Two girls in my age, 15-16 years old, looked searchingly around amongst the arriving passengers and I understood by their clothes, brown linen dresses and white aprons, that they were junior students at the National Socialist School for future nurses and social-working posts in society, and that they were looking for me. They saw me and came a little fumbling towards me with my name on the tips of their tongues. A confirmative "yes" from my side and a "welcome" from theirs and then we went through town, which was characterized by a medieval atmosphere. Spring decorated the gardens and made a good impression on me and eased my nervousness. The girls' attitude had a calming effect as well.

At the end of Litzmanstraße, a 3-storey building rose up amongst the houses. The yellow bricks shone unpolished, which is so common in West Prussia. The building was surrounded by a large garden. Inside it was clean and bright. The whole mood seemed to me to be friendly, even though ELITE was written with capital letters. I was shown to my room with three beds, tables, and chairs. There was lots of space. I opened my suitcase. On top was my "Führer portrait", which brought delight to my roommates. We had already made a good connection during our walk and now this broke the ice completely. They discussed where the portrait should be hung, and after awhile the Führer was looking down on us with his clear blue eyes, his broken collar, and uniform hat. It was a splash of colour on the light wallpaper. Thus started my life in the NSV school. That is to say, the brown one.

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In the brown school there was a 3-month trial period. After three months you either got to stay on there or you got sent to the so-called blue school, which was not so centered on politics. Their education was pretty much the same, but more specialized in baby and mother care, but free from racial biology and political schooling, which we got from the SS.

The SS functionary was a slender, elderly gentleman with glasses and completely bald. A friendly soul. We respectlessly called him

“Das Bächlein”. He loved to end his lectures by playing a piece from Bach on the organ in our common room, which doubled as a classroom. “Bach” is German for “brook”, which runs murmuring through the landscape. Bächlein, where the suffix “-lein” always means “dainty”, “small” or “sweet” emphasizes nevertheless our devotion.

But one day in July our interest was not particularly focused on his rings and colours which were conveyed on the blackboard. Otherwise the lectures on racial biology were quite interesting, but on a beautiful warm day in July our gazes kept going towards the open window. In the middle of his lecture he stopped and said with a little put-on sharpness: “I can tell that the girls’ attention isn’t the best today. I find it meaningless to stand here and babble. We’ll change the lecture to one in History, that is to say Thorn’s history, with a walk through the town together.” Laughing and overjoyed, we confirmed our positive attitude to the change and followed him out.

* * * *

Our walk around Thorn, a town with history. It is a town with Swedish connections. It was built by the river Weichsel with its medieval steeples that tower majestically over the plains. During our guided tour we looked down the river from an iron bridge. “Oh, if only we could go swimming here!” On such a summer day like this we all longed to cool off, but the Weichsel was still forbidden to swim in. Our guide saw our longing and said happily (and in hindsight full of faithful naivety): “In a couple of years girls, after our victory, this river will flow as clean as a glittering ribbon through West Prussia and you’ll be able to swim in it as much as you want”.

We visited the cathedral with its stately arches. We looked at a castle with medieval gray towers from the outside. The towers looked as if they terrifyingly looked down on us. Parks and lanes lined the city. Tired after our long tour, we rested on our beds and took a breather.

We were drowsy but we could still hear upset voices through our closed door. That surprised us, since there was always an imposed silence at this time. I myself felt ill, sometimes feeling feverish, sometimes freezing. Everything somehow foreboded an approaching catastrophe. Suddenly our door was thrown open and our superintendent shouted angrily, “Someone has tried to assassinate the Führer!” Our reaction was unequivocal horror, but we all reacted differently. One girl cried buckets, another sat stiff and white as a

ghost on the edge of her bed, while others screamed their curses on the assassin. I do not remember how I got over the first shock.

The following night was uneasy. There was no end to our discussions and ponderings. As my illness rolled through feverish dreams of blood-red waves, I listened to the murmur of voices. My roommates began to understand that something was wrong with me, but I tried cheerfully to brush off their worry with words like "If the Führer is dead, we all may as well be", "Now we'll all be slaughtered by the Polish mob". The girls asked if they should not inform the superintendent of my condition anyway, but she suddenly came into our room and informed us that the assassination attempt failed and that the Führer was alive. Relief spread over my mind and it became like a blinding glare. I lost consciousness.

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I looked up into a friendly nun's face as I lay in a large, almost round, room. "Ah ha, you're awake now. Little girl, you really scared your friends when you fainted. You have Scarlet Fever and must lie in the castle. You will be moved there once you have woken up." "The tower, I'm lying in the tower, the horrible tower!" I remember that our "Bächlein" told us that people who are afflicted with an epidemic illness stay there until they have been diagnosed. Soon I would be there too. The castle building, which was made into an epidemic hospital, was framed by vines. The courtyard was enclosed by a wall that separated us ill ones from the outside world. I lay in a room with two Polish girls and was irritated because they did not speak German. They were allowed to have visitors because they were in the recovery stage. Visitors is perhaps going too far, because the visitors stood under the balcony, and by lowering a basket, gifts could be placed in the basket and pulled up.

After enduring a couple of weeks of injections, medicine, and examinations by a doctor, my superintendent from the school, dressed in a mask and white coat, gave me, to my delight, baking and fruit. She came from North Frisia, was tall, slender, and red-haired. I never saw her in civilian clothing, but the brown linen dress, or the dark brown uniform with the NSV emblem on it, looked good on her. We students received both tenderness and just reprimands, but also the occasional scolding. We were happy under her leadership, which was surely not the easiest since she herself could not have been more than 10 years older than us 15-17 year-olds.

She had authority. That I noticed when in the middle of our conversation the two Polish girls came in talking verbosely in their mother tongue. She got up and left the room, but returned after a little while with the ward nurse, who, red as a beet, informed me that I would be moved to another room where there was a German girl. I do not know what was said, but I was really happy to be in the same room as the girl from Cologne instead of sharing a room with the Polish girls.

During my six weeks of isolation, the grapes on the wall outside our room ripened. We climbed like acrobats on the facade in order to reach the desirable clusters. But we had to be careful, partly so the ward nurse did not find out about our excursions and partly so that the personnel did not see us outside in the free world.

A couple times a week we shouted information from the balcony to each other. My friends told me about life at school. These were pleasant breaks in my otherwise very boring existence at the hospital.

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Worry over the assassination attempt on July 20, 1944 loosened its grip, but the front line started to yield. We relied on a coming victory anyway and did not worry that much about the ominous atmosphere. We were completely incorporated into the National Socialist conviction. That is why our comradeship worked entirely according to the motto "One for all, all for one". I remember this time as one of the most wonderful times in my life. We never questioned anything, we just found our community through the ideology.

But towards the end of my stay in the ward, my fighting spirit was awoken by the threat to the end of this happy period. My friends came, and were unusually many on this visiting day. They had a large armful of gladioli with them that made a fine show in an exuberant good-bye-summer greeting. But my friends were serious, not like before, joking or happily shouting. They called out, "Vera, we can't come here anymore. We're digging trenches and anti-tank ditches closer to the front line". "I'll be out soon and will help you", was my answer. And that is what happened.

When the Lilacs Bloomed Twice

During one of my visits to Kruschdorf in 1944, Friedel Keller called out to me, “Come and look! The lilacs are blooming again!” It was late summer and very sensational. Autumn was approaching and so the leaves were expected to turn yellow while the flowers’ message was about spring. We observed the phenomenon with blue but skinny bunches. Friedel’s old mother came out on the step and sounded sad. “This is a bad omen. Departure blooming is what we old folks call it. Either a young person on the farm will die, or we’ll be forced to leave the farm before spring. This is nothing to be happy about.”

Her words were to come true.

A Breach of Discipline

Upon returning to Thorn's NSV school I did something unforgivable.

My friends marched merrily away every morning to dig trenches in the town's outlying areas. I myself was ordered to perform kitchen duty because the superintendent thought that after having Scarlet Fever and my long hospital stay that I should not work that hard. I begged and pleaded to be part of the war effort, but no, I was to stay at the school.

The next morning I hid in the annex that the older students on night duty used as a sleeping quarters and snuck into the group that was leaving. My friends thought that I had permission to come along.

When we returned to the school in the afternoon I was immediately summoned to the superintendent. Red with anger she scolded me with the horrible end: "Your behavior, which caused such worry and forced a search for you, is a breach of discipline that is not tolerated at this school. You are now expelled. But before you leave, you are to write about why you behaved this way so that I can hand your letter, together with my arguments, to a higher authority." A higher authority was always the SS.

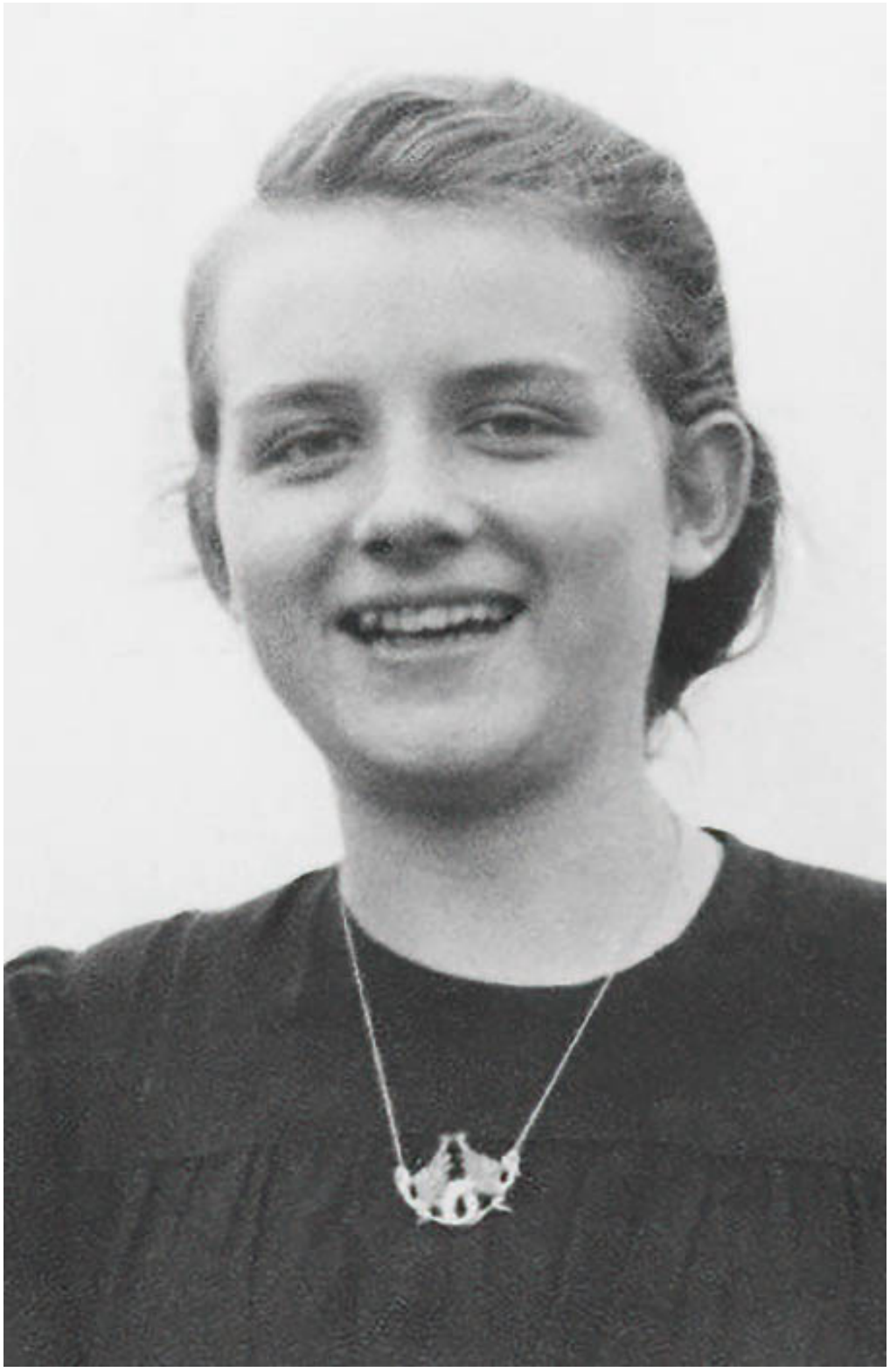
Oh no! My entire inner world collapsed into chaos and despair, regret, and a lot of self-hate. How could I be such an idiot to put myself in this situation? What is to become of me? I felt so at home and found my place in this NSV school!

In tears I sat down in the classroom and wrote and wrote a long essay with the tears streaming down my cheeks and sniffling away. I wrote about my political conviction, how I longed to be a soldier. I wrote about my hopes for Germany's future and my belief in our victory. I wrote and wrote ...

The superintendent accepted my essay and I went and packed my things. My friends tried to comfort me and said that I should apply to the blue NSV where they are not as strict. At that moment the superintendent stepped into the room and said with a muddled voice, "Unpack again. We need to talk." My friends burst out, all talking at the same time, "What have you written? Didn't you see? She was crying—you could tell."

Surprised and with noticeable relief and a thank-you to God, I unpacked my things. Unsure and hesitantly I nonetheless took the

steps to the superintendent's private room. With a re-won and respectful attitude she stood quietly by her window for a few minutes, then she turned towards me and said the same thing that the nuns in Lauban had said, "You are such an idealist Vera." She continued, "I think it was good for both of us to have suffered through these hours. From now on I will always order the students with misdemeanors to write about them. That way I'll get to learn more about the person and why they've done what they've done. It becomes much clearer if they fit in here with us or if they should go somewhere else. I can recommend those who are not totally politically committed to the cause to the blue NSV. I will not send your letter further because I'm uncertain of how firm the higher officials are when it comes to breaches of discipline of this nature, but I would really like to keep it as possible documentation. May I?" I nodded. "Tomorrow you may go along to the trenches." And she continued a little stricter, "But I don't want to hear any complaints about being tired or lack of energy. One thing I'm now certain about: you will never again do anything to breach the discipline. Understood?!" Then she did something very unusual: she gave me a hug, and at the same time she said with a sigh, "For your sake—and many of your kind—may we be victorious".



Vera, 1944.

Moss and Dirt

We dug for five hours a day. We were generally known as the industrious gnomes. We were dressed in ski pants and brown coats with hoods. Everywhere on the roads, more or less in marching order, small groups wandered eastward with their spades on their shoulders. We from our school were careful to keep the pace with polished shining spades when we left in the mornings. On our way home we always overcame our fatigue with songs and happy expressions. One time a troop of soldiers came marching by. We broke into a song that had a little faster pace so the orderly troop lost their pace and made the non-commissioned officer embarrassed. He scolded his men to our heartless amusement.

Oh yes, we sang, worked, and were in a good mood, so the Major who was our work leader often sent sour-faced Polacks who were ordered to dig trenches to our division. Our hands got callouses and our backs ached, but we kept on untiringly in the sun, rain, and wind. Hardy and used to the work, it went easier and easier and better and better to work the dirt that was sometimes sandy, sometimes clay. Until one day at the beginning of December after our last job with moss and branches, the Major came to us and informed us that our work was finished. He was a friendly soul, and despite his age was both fit and agile. He urged us to return to our education and promised us that distinctions would be awarded after Christmas. He wished us a Merry Christmas and hoped that our industrious labour would contribute to the protection against the Soviet red advance.

We marched back to the school without spades, which were left to the military trucks. We could see our breath when we sang our songs once more, perhaps not as merrily, but with stubbornness, defiance, and faith in the future.

The Sun-Wheel

We students sat on pins and needles in our rooms waiting for the gong-gong's metallic sound. For several weeks our superintendents had been kept secretly busy and locked themselves in the kitchen or sewing room, whispering and humming softly.

We were dressed in new dresses and aprons that were received with mixed feelings. Blue checkered ones, typical for Germany, the Dirndel model with funny-looking aprons. We got the explanation that these were to be worn instead of the uniform-like brown dresses that were now reserved for the higher grades. During this uneasy time that was now upon us with civilian casualties, we could end up in a situation where we were ordered to immediately help out with things that we had not yet gotten to in our courses and could not do. It made sense, but we pre-nursing students wanted so much to be like the real nurses.

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BONG-BONG sounded the much longed-for ringing and we quickly lined up in order in front of the door to the room. It was opened by our head nurse and her red hair shone like a Gloria from all the candles that shone in the background. The room was dominated by a decorated spruce that was still without lights.

In front of it was a table where the burning candles were positioned in the shape of a sun-wheel. (What this would mean later on in life I did not know then.) Along the long table there were plates with written name tags that were filled will all sorts of good things: nuts, cakes, caramels, chocolate. We were really privileged in this otherwise scanty time. On our chairs there were packages from our families. Even the Swedish Church from Berlin had remembered me. We solemnly sang Christmas carols and the Christmas tree was lit up with candles from the table where the sun-wheel stood, while our superintendent recited. What a Christmas Eve! None of us had any idea how close we were to the front line or that there were just a few weeks left of a free Germany, especially West Prussia.

And the Sky turned Red

On January 17, 1945, we sat and looked anxiously across the wintry street and watched the eager people in the houses across the street pack their belongings. They ran around like chickens with their heads cut off with boxes, bags, and fully-packed baby carriages and wagons. Suddenly the clear dark blue starry sky turned a shade of pink and then red. The door was thrown open and a terrified student from the next grade screamed, "Do you know what? The Russians are just about 30 km from here!" We stared at her like we were possessed. "That can't be true," I answered. "You're lying." "No, it's true. The patients that are coming to the hospital told me." Sister Ilse's voice interrupted her torrent of words: "You older ones should have learned more manners and sense to avoid causing panic. The front line will surely hold. Go to bed and don't work yourselves up."

Her calming voice eased our worries, but sleep? That turned out to be more difficult when the sky got redder and redder and redder and the explosions duller, duller, duller and closer, closer, and closer. In my anxious sleep I could already begin to see the end in my dreams.

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Morning came with declining noise from the activities on the front line and in the daylight everything looked more peaceful. We ate our early breakfast as usual, but before doing our chores our superintendent had something to say to us: We were to pack our most precious belongings and prepare to leave in case something happened. It felt for us like it must have felt for the passengers on the shipwrecked Titanic in 1912. It was about our lives, our hopes, and the future.

We met in the sewing room where the seamstress patiently but with a certain irony criticized many times my mending of the soldiers' socks that were delivered from the laundry. Now we just sat there. The laughing and the usual giggling were not heard. The seamstress was not there, and anxiously we looked through the narrow window and saw below where people were running around, bags were being carried, and wheels were squeaking. Some bicycles skidded around and made for a few laughs anyway. The darkness came back with its threatening mood and now even machine gun fire could be heard in the distance. The bell rang, but not for a party.

The noise echoed ominously. Pale, but with self-control, our superintendent Ilse stood and gave her orders: "All the younger

students shall go home immediately. Vera and some of the older students will go to Bromberg with the hospital buses. The rest of you will take the train to Danzig where you will continue your journey westward."

I lost total control of myself, broke into tears, and wanted to stay and fight. I would rather die than experience the fate of the loser. I do not know what all I said before Sister Ilse brought me back in line, sometimes strict, sometimes mild, and I pulled myself together and went to the closet to pack.

Then I took a farewell walk around the school. First I went to the meeting room in the basement and remembered the events that substantiated the saying "When the cat's away...", like when we were left by ourselves when our superiors were at a party and we dressed up as mischief-makers and pirates, and with glasses of juice we bellowed out drinking songs, and I could hear like an echo "Jimmy, we don't drink beer or wine, just whiskey". One floor up to the meeting room where dances with the cadets, sketches for the young SS men and the injured soldiers were held. And the classroom with our "Bächlein" and the college teacher.

With trembling hands I took down my portrait of the Führer that had protectively hung over my bed in Berlin and now decorated the wall in the NSV school. Carefully I placed the portrait on top of my clothes in my suitcase and closed it with the words, "No enemy shall desecrate you". My friends watched me with restrained tears.

At that moment something in me died. The emptiness has never been filled since then. A sorrowful loss remains, and will so for the rest of my life. An eternal longing to the blooming flagpoles.

Organizations in National Socialist Germany

In my book I mention the different organizations that there were in the Third Reich and would here like to clarify them according to my own understanding of them and experiences I have had when I have been in contact with them.

Hitler Youth

JV, Jungvolk (German Young People, translator's note): for boys between the ages of 10 and 14.

HJ, Hitlerjungend (Hitler Youth, translator's note): for boys between the ages of 14 and 18.

JM, Jungmädel (League of Young Girls, translator's note): for girls between the ages of 10 and 14.

As a 10-year-old girl I voluntarily joined the Hitler Youth. We were summoned to gatherings about eight to ten times a month, with breaks for summer holidays and religious holidays.

In the summer we participated in outdoor activities and sports, walks, and visits to historical places. In the winter we had a lot of home evenings, meetings in different districts, peasant-style youth centers where we learned to sing, make toys, or had reading evenings when we studied famous German authors. All this in peaceful get-togethers in an atmosphere of comradeship and community, which is of utmost importance to National Socialism.

We were never forced to partake in the Hitler Youth. Such statements are purely false. That the desire for compulsory recruitment grew during the war years and that friends who were not members were looked upon with suspicion is another matter, given that we all wanted a youth organization that fought united for a German victory, that is true, but that there was any kind of force coupled with police intervention or punishment of parents, siblings, or others, are total lies.

BDM, Bund Deutscher Mädel (The League of German Girls, translator's note): for girls between the ages of 14 and 18

From JM the girls continued after going through Jugendweihe (the youth inauguration) with an oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler and National Socialist Germany to BDM.

Because the Swedish Church, which I was a member of, did not fulfill the requirement of neutrality, which my family had to accept, my Jugendweihe was seen as a confirmation and was celebrated at home. As far as I am concerned, my Jugendweihe was performed

during the war and the service was done by volunteer schooling, like collections for the soldiers, help to the victims of the bombings, and the clean-up work after the terror bombings. The work in the rural areas on the farms was part of our job, but there was also time for sports, games, information, personal performances, drills, and marches. The latter appealed to us because we felt more like equals with the male organizations.

I can only remember joy, the will to live, comradeship, and devotion within the youth movement, especially as long as I lived in Berlin. The only sour apples in the basket that irritated me were that my results in sports were not always that good. If, with my long throws with balls, javelins, shot put and discus, I could win high points for the desirable annual sport spin, I was overjoyed, but it only happened twice because my results in jumping, running, and hurdles were too low.

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KLV, Kinderlandverschickung (Child Land Dispatch)

The NSV (see below) organized the evacuation of the children from the major cities during the Allies' air raids. The government paid for the children's room and board, education, and leisure activities while they were away from home. It was up to the parents if they wanted their children to stay in these camps. Some children went to stay with friends or relatives in the country, while others stayed at home with their parents.

* * * *

SA, Sturmabteilung (Storm Troopers, translator's note)

Is there anything as lied about as the SA? These men in their brown shirts, with their songs, walked through the streets. They were normal young men and fathers who found a sense of community and comradeship in meaningful activity. They were neither boozers, sadists, nor common hateful monsters that bellowed like dregs through the streets, as they are often portrayed in the Hollywood movies. Lies are often entirely without limit.

Because my father was an SA leader I had close contact with the SA men and was often allowed to go with information to "his men" when it came to changed meeting times, change of venue, and the like. All of them were proper, respectful, and nice people. That this corps was to have consisted of beasts and so-called uneducated boors, as today's education tries to teach, is a complete lie.

For us National Socialists, all working people are of equal worth. We do not value people by their titles, but if there happens to be a degree-obsessed title fanatic who still wants to have that as a measure of value in his relations, we can remind him that when it comes to the SA, it had members from Kaiser Wilhelm's closest relatives and my own father was a certified engineer with top grades from both high school and university. This is just one example of how the lies about the SA can be spread amongst ignorant people.

The services of the SA consisted of being blockade chains with foreign state visits in the country's capital because the curious Berliners crowded around down the parade street. Or when Adolf Hitler travelled through the joyful folk masses. The Olympic pictures from 1936 show much of the services of the SA men as functionaries and the like.

During the war years their services on the home front were irreplaceable. They kept the streets clean from snow and leaves. They were on watch in the neighbourhoods during the night bombings, they alerted people to where the bombs had struck, they put out fires, encouraged people, and were called upon to prevent panic, and to do clearing work when the danger-is-over signal sounded.

They met over a beer when the opportunity arose. They had their sporting events. They sang and marched. I was happy when I saw the long columns, where one saw the swastika armbands moving in perfect time with the movement of the men's arms, shone out and disappeared... And with my father as troop leader, who marched at his platoon's side, I felt proud.

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SS, Schutzstaffel (Protection Squadron, translator's note)

Personally I did not have as much contact with the SS as I did with the SA. The SS men I did however get to know were fantastic. Generally speaking, the so-called "advantageous appearance" of fresh radiance and dignity that later on gave the label of "a mother-in-law's dream", symbolized them.

The few times I came in contact with them, exchanged letters with one, I could do nothing but admire them. Their education was both difficult and of high class, and was naturally directed wholly towards the National Socialist spirit.

Race consciousness was the goal and I have often wondered what is wrong with being an elitist or race conscious. It never means racial hate or looking down on other races just because one honours one's

own. How much of the misery in the world does not have its roots in this widespread racial mixing that goes against the laws of nature? We live today in a superficial world, forced upon us after the great outbreak of peace in 1945, where we white Europeans and Nordic people were invaded by foreign races who, not only as the goal of the victors, forced upon us their so-called music, Islamic religion, the spread of AIDS, and the suppression of women, to name a few things. And in the trails of these we find drug abuse, criminality, and the disgust of our nations' traditions.

If there is anything that should be the dream of the European people, it is the existence of the SS, and I refuse to understand the so-called national sympathizers who, in their eagerness, rub out their former National Socialist sympathies by denouncing the SS. Of course their "distancing" is merely a fawning towards our opposition to try to win favour in their opinion, but such individuals just prove that their "National Socialist conviction" never had any depth to it.

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NSV, Nationalsozialiatische Volkswohlfart (National Socialist People's Welfare, translator's note)

This was a social organization that was divided into two main groups, the brown and the blue. These represented the child welfare centers, counselors, maternity care, health care, everything that was connected to the welfare of the people. The blue group had less of a political character, while the brown one was closer to the SS. I can mention that such things as the Red Cross, the nuns' social contributions, the lay workers, etc., were all considered to be a part of the welfare services. NSV was one of the organizations that provided care, and it worked side by side with the others.

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RAD, Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labour Service, translator's note)

This was an organization for young men and women, where the men worked with infrastructure, for example, and during the war with cleaning up and rebuilding the bombed areas and communications whereas the women worked with farmers, families, and childcare centers in the rural areas. All members of the RAD were educated in and about well-kept homes in the country. One-year RAD service was compulsory so that the city girls could learn about life in the country in the name of community service. Girls from the country got to work in factories for the same purpose and got a glimpse of production and where, amongst other things, the

tools for agriculture came from. During the war the services were naturally done within the arms industry.

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SSS, Svensk Socialistisk Samling (Swedish Socialist Congregation, translator's note)

This organization had an office in Berlin. Ties of friendship were made between expatriated Swedes who had been frozen out of the Swedish Church. Swedish volunteers and functionaries who were trained in Germany could meet there.

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There were of course many more organizations. Even within the organizations that I have mentioned there were branches for different interests: flying, gliding, sea fare and motor vehicles, and the many cultural branches for music, painting, and sculptures.

Everything and everyone was satisfied. The only common direction that could be noticed was that everything that was done should benefit the people and the home country.